SHORT STORY COLLECTION

WARD PRESCOTT

THE MAN IN RATCATCHER

CYRIL McNEILE

By CYRIL McNEILE "SAPPER"

THE MAN IN RATCATCHER

BULL-DOG DRUMMOND

MUFTI

THE HUMAN TOUCH

NO MAN'S LAND

MICHAEL CASSIDY, SERGEANT

MEN, WOMEN, AND GUNS

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

THE MAN IN RATCATCHER

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

CYRIL McNEILE

"SAPPER"

AUTHOR OF "BULL-DOG DRUMMOND," "THE HUMAN TOUCH," "MUFTI," ETC.

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Clever, & in some cases effective. Seem more like the American type of short stories than the English.

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I

'E AIN'T much ter look at, Major, but 'e's a 'andy little 'orse."

A groom, chewing the inevitable straw, gave a final polish to the saddle, and then stood at the animal's head, waiting for the tall, spare man with the bronzed, weather-beaten face, who was slowly drawing on his gloves in the yard, to mount. Idly the groom wondered if the would-be sportsman knew which side of a horse it was customary to get into the saddle from; in fact one Nimrod recently—a gentleman clothed in spotless pink—had so far excelled himself as to come to rest facing his horse's tail. But what could you expect these times, reflected the groom, when most of the men who could ride in days gone by, would ride no more: and a crowd of galloping tinkers, with rank cigars and ranker manners, had taken their places? When he thought of the men who came now—and the women, too—to Boddington's Livery Stable, renowned

for fifty years and with a reputation second to none, and contrasted them with their predecessors, he was wont to spit, mentally and literally. And the quods—Strewth! It was a fair disgrace to turn out such 'orses from Boddington's. Only the crowd wot rode 'em didn't know no better: the 'orses was quite good enough—aye! too good—for the likes o' them.

"Let out that throat-lash a couple of holes."

The groom looked at the speaker dazedly for a moment; a bloke that knew the name of a single bit of saddlery on a horse's back was a rare customer these days.

"And take that ironmonger's shop out of the poor brute's mouth. I'll ride him on a snaffle."

"'E pulls a bit when 'e's fresh, Major," said the groom, dubiously.

The tall, spare man laughed. "I think I'll risk it," he answered. "Where did you pick him up—at a jumble sale?"

"'E ain't much ter look at, I knows, Major," said the groom, carrying out his instructions. "But if yer 'andle 'im easy, and nurse 'im a bit, 'e'll give yer some sport."

"I can quite believe it," remarked the other, swinging into the saddle. "Ring the bell, will you? That will give him his cue to start."

With a grin on his face the groom watched the melancholy steed amble sedately out of the yard and down the road.

Before he had gone fifty yards the horse's head had come up a little, he was walking more collectedly—looking as if he had regained some of the spring of

former days. For there was a *man* on his back—a man born and bred to horses and their ways—and it would be hard to say which of the two, the groom or the animal, realised it first. Which was why the grin so quickly effaced itself. The groom's old pride in Boddington's felt outraged at having to offer such a mount to such a man. He turned as a two-seated racing car pulled up in the yard, and a young man stepped out. He nodded to the groom as he removed his coat, and the latter touched his cap.

"Grand day, Mr. Dawson," he remarked. "Scent should be good."

The newcomer grunted indifferently, and adjusted his already faultless stock, while another groom led out a magnificent blood chestnut from a loose-box.

"Who was the fellah in ratcatcher I passed, ridin' that awful old quod of yours?" he asked.

To such a sartorial exquisite a bowler hat and a short coat was almost a crime.

"I dunno, sir," said the groom. "Ain't never seen 'im before to the best of me knowledge. But you'll see 'im at the finish."

The other regarded his chestnut complacently.

"He won't live half a mile if we get goin'," he remarked. "You want a horse if hounds find in Spinner's Copse: not a prehistoric bone-bag." He glanced at the old groom's expressionless face, and gave a short laugh in which there was more than a hint of self-satisfaction. "And you can't get a horse without money these days, George, and dam' big money at that." He carefully adjusted his pink coat as he sat in the saddle. "Have the grey taken to Merton cross-

roads: and you can take the car there, too," he continued, turning to the chauffeur.

Then with a final hitch at his coat, he too went out of the yard. For a while the old groom watched him dispassionately, until a bend in the road hid him from sight. Then he turned to one of his underlings and delivered himself of one of his usual cryptic utterances.

"'Ave yer ever seen a monkey, Joe, sittin' on the branch of a tree, 'uggin' a waxwork doll?"

"Can't say as 'ow I 'ave, G'arge," returned the other, after profound cogitation.

"Well, yer don't need to. That monkey'd be the same shape 'as 'im on a 'orse."

II

The meet of the South Leicesters at Spinner's Copse generally produced a field even larger than the normal huge crowd which followed that well-known pack. It was near the centre of their country, and if Fate was kind, and the fox took the direction of Hangman's Bottom, the line was unsurpassed in any country in the world.

It was a quarter to eleven when the tall, spare man, having walked the three-quarters of a mile from Boddington's, dismounted by the side of the road, and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. His eyes took in every detail of the old familiar scene; and, in spite of himself, his mind went back to the last time he had been there. He smiled a little bitterly: he had been a fool to come, and open old wounds. This game wasn't for him any more: his hunting days were over. If things had been

different: if only—— He drew back as a blood chestnut, fretting and irritable under a pair of heavy hands, came dancing by, spattering mud in all directions. If only—well! he might have been riding that chestnut instead of the heated clothes-peg on his back now. He looked with a kind of weary cynicism at his own mount, mournfully nibbling grass: then he laid a kindly hand on the animal's neck.

"'Tain't your fault, old son, is it?" he muttered. "But to think of Spinner's Copse—and you. Oh! ye gods!"

"Hounds, gentlemen, please." The man looked up quickly with a sudden gleam in his eyes as hounds came slowly past. A new second whip they'd got; he remembered now, Wilson had been killed at Givenchy. But the huntsman, Mathers, was the same—a little greyer perhaps—but still the same shrewd, kindly sportsman. He caught his eye at that moment, and looked away quickly. He felt certain no one would recognise him, but he wanted to run no risks. There weren't likely to be many of the old crowd out to-day, and he'd altered almost beyond recognition—but it was as well to be on the safe side. And Mathers, he remembered of old, had an eye like a hawk.

He pretended to fumble with his girths, turning his back on the huntsman. It was perhaps as well that he did so for his own peace of mind; for Joe Mathers, with his jaw slowly opening, was staring fascinated at the stooping figure. He was dreaming, of course; it couldn't be him—not possibly. The man whom this stranger was like was dead—killed on the Somme.

Entirely imagination. But still the huntsman stared, until a sudden raising of hats all round announced the arrival of the Master.

It was the moment that the tall, quiet man, standing a little aloof on the outskirts of the crowd, had been dreading. He had told himself frequently that he had forgotten the girl who stepped out of the car with her father; he had told himself even more frequently that she had long since forgotten him. But, now, as he saw once more the girl's glowing face and her slender, upright figure, showed off to perfection by her habit, he stifled a groan, and cursed himself more bitterly than ever for having been such a fool as to come. If only —once again those two bitter words mocked him. He had not forgotten; he never would forget; and it was not the least part of the price he had to pay for the criminal negligence of his late father.

He glanced covertly at the girl; she was talking vivaciously to the man whom he had designated as a heated clothes-peg. He noticed the youth bending towards her with an air of possession which infuriated him; then he laughed and swung himself into the saddle. What had it got to do with him?

Then on a sudden impulse he turned to a farmer next him.

"Who is that youngster talking to the Master's daughter?" he asked.

The farmer looked at him in mild surprise. "You'm a stranger to these parts, mister, evidently," he said. "That be young Mr. Dawson; and folks do say he be engaged to Miss Gollanfield."

Engaged! To that young blighter! With hands like

pot-hooks, and a seat like an elephant! And then, quite suddenly, he produced his handkerchief, and proceeded most unnecessarily to blow his nose. For Mathers was talking excitedly to Sir Hubert Gollanfield and Major Dawlish, the hunt secretary; and the eyes of all three men were fixed on him.

"I thought it was before, sir, and then I saw him mount, and I know," said Mathers, positively.

"It can't be. He was killed in France," answered the Master. "Wasn't he, David?"

"I've always heard so," said Dawlish. "I'll go and cap him now and have a closer look."

"Anyway, Joe, not a word at present." The Master turned to Mathers. "We'd better draw the spinney first."

Through the crowd, as it slowly moved off, the secretary threaded his way towards the vaguely familiar figure ahead. It couldn't be; it was out of the question. And yet, as he watched him, more and more did he begin to believe that the huntsman was right. Little movements; an odd, indefinable hitch of the shoulders; the set of the stranger's head. And then, with almost a catch in his breath, he saw that the man he was following had left the crowd, and was unostentatiously edging for a certain gap, which to the uninitiated appeared almost a *cul-de-sac*. Of course, it might be just chance; on the other hand, that gap was the closely-guarded preserve—as far as such things may be guarded—of the chosen few who really rode; the first-fighters—the men who took their own line, and wanted that invaluable hundred yards' start to get them clear of the mob.

Slightly quickening his pace, the secretary followed his quarry. He overtook him just as he had joined the bare dozen, who, with hats rammed down, sat waiting for the first whimper. They were regarding the newcomer with a certain curiosity as the secretary came up; almost with that faint hostility which is an Englishman's special prerogative on the entrance of a second person to his otherwise empty railway carriage. Who was this fellow in ratcatcher mounted on a hopeless screw? And what the devil was he doing here, anyway?

"Mornin', David." A chorus of greeting hailed the advent of the popular secretary, but, save for a brief nod and smile, he took no notice. His eyes were fixed on the stranger, who was carefully adjusting one of his leathers.

"Excuse me, sir." Major Dawlish walked his horse up to him, and then sat staring and motionless. "My God, it can't be——" He spoke under his breath, and the stranger apparently failed to hear.

"What is the cap?" he asked, courteously. "A fiver this season, I believe."

"Danny!" The secretary was visibly agitated. "You're Danny Drayton! And we thought you were dead!"

"I fear, sir, that there is some mistake," returned the other. "My name is John Marston."

In silence the two men looked at one another, and then Major Dawlish bowed.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Marston," he said, gravely. "But you bear a strange resemblance to a certain very dear friend of mine, whom we all believed had been

killed at Flers in 1916. He combined two outstanding qualities," continued the secretary, deliberately, "did that friend of mine: quixotic chivalry to the point of idiocy, and the most wonderful horsemanship."

Once more the eyes of the two men met, and then John Marston looked away, staring over the wonderful bit of country lying below them.

"I am sorry," he remarked, quietly, "that you should have lost your friend."

"Ah, but have I, Mr. Marston; have I?" interrupted David Dawlish, quickly.

"You tell me he died at Flers," returned the other. "And very few mistakes were made in such matters, which have not been rectified since."

"He disappeared a year or two before the war," said the secretary, "suddenly—without leaving a trace. We heard he had gone to New Zealand; but we could get no confirmation. Do you ever go to the Grand National, Mr. Marston?" he continued, with apparent irrelevance.

The stranger stiffened in his saddle. "I have been," he answered, abruptly. Merciful heavens! wouldn't some hound own to scent soon?

"Do you remember that year when a certain gentleman rider was booed on the course?" went on the secretary, reminiscently. "It was the year John Drayton and Son went smash for half a million: and it was the son who was booed."

"I don't wonder," returned the stranger. "He was a fool to ride."

"Was he, Mr. Marston? Was he? Or was it just part of that quixotic chivalry of which I have spoken?

The horse was a rogue: there was no one else who could do him justice: so, rather than disappoint his friend, the owner, the son turned out."

"And very rightly got hissed for his pains," said John Marston, grimly. "I remember the smash well—Drayton's smash. It ruined thousands of poor people: and only a legal quibble saved a criminal prosecution."

"True," assented the secretary. "But it was old Drayton's fault. We all knew it at the time. Danny Drayton—the son——"

"The man who died at Flers," interrupted John Marston, and the secretary looked at him quietly.

"Perhaps: perhaps not. Mistakes *have* occurred. But whether he died or whether he didn't—the son was incapable of even a mean thought. He was not to blame."

"I must beg to differ, sir," returned John Marston. "The firm was Drayton *and Son:* the Son was responsible as much as the father. If one member of a firm goes wrong, the other members must make good. It is only fair to the public."

"I see," answered the secretary. "Then I wonder who the other member of the firm can have been? The father died soon after the exposure: the son died at Flers." He looked John Marston straight in the face.

"That would seem to account for the firm," returned the other, indifferently.

"Except for one thing," said the secretary, "the significance of which—strangely enough—has only just struck me. There's a certain old farmer in this district who invested one hundred pounds with Drayton—all his savings. Along with the rest, it went smash. A

month or two ago he received one hundred and thirty-five pounds in notes, from an unknown source. Seven years' interest at five per cent. is thirty-five pounds." And suddenly the secretary, usually one of the most unemotional of men, leaned forward in his saddle, and his voice was a little husky. "Danny! You damned quixotic fool! Come back to us: we can't afford to lose a man who can go like you."

The man in ratcatcher stared fixedly in front of him —his profile set and rigid. For a moment the temptation was well-nigh overwhelming: every account squared up—every loss made good. Then, ringing in his ears, he heard once more the yells and cat-calls as he had cantered past the stand at Aintree.

"As I said to you before, sir," he said, facing the secretary steadily: "My name is John Marston. You are making a mistake."

What Major Dawlish's reply would have been will never be known. He seemed on the point of an explosion of wrath, when clear and shrill through the morning air came Joe Mathers' "gone away." The pack came tumbling out of covert, and everything else was forgotten.

"It's the right line," cried John Marston, excitedly. "Hangman's Bottom, for a quid."

The field streamed off, everyone according to their own peculiar methods bent on getting the best they could out of a breast-high scent. The macadam brigade left early, and set grimly about their dangerous task. The man whose horse always picked up a stone early if the run was likely to be a hot one, and arrived cursing his luck, late but quite safe, duly dismounted and

fumbled with his outraged steed's perfectly sound hoof. The main body of the field streamed along in a crowd —that big section which is the backbone of every hunt, which contains every variety of individual, and in which every idiosyncrasy of character may be observed by the man who has eyes to see. And then in front of all, riding their own line—but not, as the uninitiated might imagine, deliberately selecting the most impossible parts of every jump, merely for the sport of the thing—the select few.

They had gone two miles without the suspicion of a check, before the secretary found himself near Sir Hubert. Both in their day had belonged to that select few, but now they were content to take things a little easier.

"It's Danny, Hubert," said the secretary, as they galloped side by side over a pasture field towards a stiff-looking post and rails. "Calling himself John Marston."

The Master grunted—glancing for a moment under his bushy eyebrows at the man, two or three hundred yards in front, who, despite his mount, still lived with the vanguard.

"Of course it is," he snorted. "There's no one else would be where he is, on a horse like that, with hounds running at this rate."

They steadied their pace as they came to the timber, and neither spoke again till they were halfway across the next field.

"What's his game, David? Confound you, sir," his voice rose to a bellow, as he turned in his saddle and glared at an impetuous youth behind, "will you

kindly not ride in my pocket? Infernal young puppy! What's his game, David?"

"Quixotic tommy-rot," snorted the other. "He knows I know he's Danny; but he won't admit it."

"Has Molly seen him yet?" Sir Hubert glanced away to the left, where his daughter, on a raking black, had apparently got her hands full.

"I don't know."

The secretary, frowning slightly, followed the direction of the other's gaze. David Dawlish was no lover of young Dawson. He watched the girl for a moment, noting the proximity of the blood chestnut close to her: then he turned back to his old friend. "That black is too much for Molly, Hubert," he said, a trifle uneasily. "He'll get away with her some day."

"You tell her so, and see what happens, old man," chuckled Sir Hubert. "I tried once." Then he reverted to the old subject. "What are we going to do about it, David, if it is Danny?"

"There's nothing we can do," answered the other. "Officially, he's dead; the War Office have said so. If he chooses to remain John Marston we can't stop him."

And so for the time the matter was left; the hunting-field, when the going is hot enough for the veriest glutton, is no place for idle speculation and talk. There is time enough for that afterwards; while hounds are running it behoves a man to attend to the business in hand.

The pace by this time was beginning to tell. The main body of the hunt now stretched over half a dozen fields; even the first-flight section was getting thinned

out. And it was as David Dawlish topped the slight rise which hid the brook at the bottom of the valley beyond—the notorious Cedar Brook—that he found himself next to Molly Gollanfield.

Streaming up the other side were hounds, with Joe Mathers safely over the water and fifty yards behind them. Two or three others were level with him, riding wide to his flank, but the secretary's eyes were fixed on a man in ratcatcher who was just ramming an obviously tiring horse at the brook. With a faint grin, he noted the place he had selected to jump; the spot well known to everyone familiar with the country as being the best and firmest take-off. He watched the horse rise—just fail to clear—stumble and peck badly; he saw the rider literally lift it on to its legs again, and sail on with barely a perceptible pause. And then he glanced at Molly Gollanfield.

"Well ridden; well ridden!" The girl's impulsive praise at a consummate piece of horsemanship made him smile a little grimly. What would she say when she knew the identity of the horseman? And what would he say?

They flew the brook simultaneously, young Dawson a few yards behind, and swept on up the other side of the valley.

"Who is that man in front, Uncle David?" called out the girl. "It's a treat to watch him ride."

"His name, so he tells me, is John Marston," said the secretary, quietly.

"Has he ever been out with us before?"

They breasted the hill as she spoke, to find that the point had ended, as such a run should end—but rarely

does—with a kill in the open. The survivors of the front brigade had already dismounted as they came up, and for a few moments no one could think or speak of anything but the run. And it was a Captain Malvin, in one of the Lancer regiments, who recalled the mysterious stranger to the girl's mind.

"Who is that fellow in ratcatcher, Major?" Malvin was standing by her as he spoke, and the girl glanced round to find the subject of his interest.

He had dismounted twenty or thirty yards away, and was making much of his horse, which was completely cooked.

"Saw him in Boddington's," remarked young Dawson. "How the devil did he manage to get here on that?"

"By a process known as riding," said Malvin, briefly. "If you mounted that man on a mule, he'd still be at the top of a hunt—eh, Miss Gollanfield?"

But Molly Gollanfield was staring fascinated at the stranger. "Who did you say it was, Uncle David?" Her voice was low and tense, and Malvin glanced at her in surprise.

"John Marston," returned the secretary, slowly, "is the name he gave me."

And at that moment the man in ratcatcher looked at the girl.

"John Marston," she faltered. "Why—why—it's Danny! Danny, I thought you were dead!"

She walked her horse towards him and held out her hand, while a wonderful light dawned in her eyes.

"Danny!" she cried, "don't you remember me?"

And gradually the look of joy faded from her face,

to be replaced by one of blank amazement. For the man was looking at her as if she had been a stranger.

Then, with a courteous bow, he removed his hat. "You are the second person, madam, who has made the same mistake this morning. My name is John Marston."

But the girl only stared at him in silence, and shook her head.

"I've been watching you ride, Danny," she said, at length, "and just think of it—I didn't know you. What a blind little fool I was, wasn't I?"

"I don't see how you could be expected to recognise me, madam," answered the man. "I hope you'll have as good a second run as the one we've just had. I'm afraid this poor old nag must go stablewards."

He looped the reins over his arm, and once more raised his hat as he turned away.

"But, Danny," cried the girl, a little wildly, "you can't go like this."

"Steady, Molly." Young Dawson was standing beside her, looking a little ruffled. "I don't know who the devil Danny is or was; but this fellow says he's John Marston. You can't go throwin' your arms round a stranger's neck in the huntin'-field. It's simply not done."

"When I require your assistance on what is or is not done, Mr. Dawson, I will let you know," returned the girl, coldly. "Until then, kindly keep such information to yourself."

"Mr. Dawson!" The youth recoiled a pace. "Molly! what do you mean?"

But the girl was taking not the slightest notice of

him; her eyes were fixed on the stranger, who was talking for a moment to David Dawlish.

"You forgot to take my cap," he said to the secretary, with a smile. "If you like I will send it along by post; or, if you prefer it, I have it on me now."

And at that moment it occurred. It was all so quick that no one could be quite sure what happened. Perhaps it was a horse barging into the black's quarters; perhaps it was the sudden flash of young Dawson's cigarette-case in the sun. Perhaps only Uncle David saw what really caused the black suddenly to give one wild convulsive buck and bolt like the wind with the girl sawing vainly at its mouth.

For a moment there was a stunned silence; then, with an agonised cry, Sir Hubert started to clamber into his saddle.

"The quarry!" His frenzied shout sent a chill into the hearts of everyone who heard, and half the hunt started to mount. Only too well did they know the danger; the black was heading straight for the old disused slate-pit.

But it was the immaculate Dawson who suffered the greatest shock. He had just got his foot into the stirrup when he felt himself picked up like a child and deposited in the mud. And mounted on *his* chestnut was the man in ratcatcher.

"Keep back—all of you." The tall, spare figure rose in the saddle and dominated the scene. "It's a one-man job." Then he swung the chestnut round, gave him one rib-binder, and followed the bolting black.

"Hi! you, sir!" spluttered Dawson, shaking a fist at the retreating figure. "That's my horse."

But no one paid the smallest attention to the aggrieved youth; motionless and intent, they were staring at the two galloping horses. They saw the man swinging left-handed, and for a moment they failed to realise his object.

"What's he doing? What's he doing?" David Dawlish was jumping up and down in his excitement. "He'll never catch her like that."

"He will," roared the cavalryman. "Oh, lovely, lovely—look at that recovery, sir—I ask you, look at it! Don't you see his game, man?" he turned to the secretary. "He's coming up between her and the quarry, and he'll ride her off. If he came up straight behind, nothing could save 'em. It's too close."

Fascinated, the field watched the grim race—helpless, unable to do anything but sit and look on. The man in ratcatcher had been right, and they knew it, when he had called it a one-man job. A crowd of galloping horses would have maddened the black to frenzy.

And as for the two principal performers, they were perhaps the coolest of all. For a few agonising seconds, when the girl first realised that Nigger was bolting, she panicked; then, being a thoroughbred herself, she pulled herself together and tried to stop him. But he was away with her—away with her properly; and it was just as she realised it, with a sickening feeling of helplessness, that a strong, ringing voice came clearly from behind her left shoulder.

"Drop your near rein, Molly; put both hands on your off, and pull—girl—pull! I'm coming."

She heard the thud of his horse behind her, and the black spurted again. But the chestnut crept up till it

was level with her girths—till the two horses were neck and neck.

"Pull, darling, pull!" With a wild thrill she heard his voice low and tense beside her; regardless of everything, she stole one look at his steady eyes, which flashed a message of confidence back.

"Pull—pull, on that off rein."

She felt the chestnut hard against her legs, boring into her as the man, exerting every ounce of his strength, started to ride her off.

The black was coming round little by little; no horse living could have resisted the combined pull of the one rein and the pressure of the consummate rider on the other side. More and more the man swung her right-handed, never relaxing his steady pressure for an instant, and, at last, with unspeakable relief, she realised that they were galloping parallel with the edge of the quarry and not towards it. It had been touch and go—another twenty yards; and then, at the same moment, they both saw it. Straight in front of them, stretching back from the top of the pit, there yawned a great gap. She had forgotten the landslip during the last summer.

She saw the man lift his crop, and give the black a heavy blow on the near side of his head; she heard his frenzied shout of "Pull—for God's sake—pull!" and then she was galloping alone. Dimly she heard a dreadful crash and clatter behind her; she had one fleeting glimpse of a chestnut horse rolling over and over, and bumping sickeningly downwards, while something else bumped downwards too; then she was past the gap with a foot to spare. That one stunning blow with the crop had swung the amazed black through half a

right-angle to safety; it had made the chestnut swerve through half a right-angle the other way to——

Ah, no! not that. Not dead—not dead. He couldn't be that—not Danny. And she knew it was Danny; had known it all along. Blowing like a steam-engine, the black had stopped, exhausted, and she left him standing where he was, as she ran back to the edge of the gap.

"Danny! Danny—my man!" she called in an agony. "Speak—just a word, Danny. My God! it was all my fault!"

Feverishly she started to clamber down towards the still figure sprawling motionless below. But no answer came to her; only the thud of countless other horses, as the field came up to the scene of the disaster.

Sir Hubert, almost beside himself with emotion, was babbling incoherently; the secretary and Joe Mathers were little better.

"Only Danny could have done it," he cried over and over again. "Only Danny could have saved her. And, by Gad! sir, he has—and given his life to do it." He peered over the top, and called out anxiously to the girl below: "Careful, my darling, careful; we can get to him round by the road."

But the girl paid no heed to her father's cry: and when half a dozen men, headed by David Dawlish, rode furiously in by the old entrance to the quarry, they found her sitting on the ground with the unconscious man's head pillowed on her lap.

She lifted her face, streaming with tears, and looked at the secretary.

"He's dead, Uncle David. Danny! my Danny! And it was all my fault."

For a few moments no one spoke; then one of the men stepped forward.

"May I examine him, Miss Gollanfield?" He knelt down beside the motionless figure. "I'm not a doctor, but——" For what seemed an eternity he bent over him; then he rose quickly. "A flask at once. There is still life."

It was not until the limp body had been gently placed on an extemporised stretcher, to wait for the ambulance, that the cavalryman turned to David Dawlish.

"Danny!" he said, thoughtfully. "Not Danny Drayton?"

"Himself and no other," replied the secretary. "Masquerading as John Marston."

The cavalryman whistled softly. "The last time I saw him was at Aintree, before the war. I never could get to the bottom of that matter."

"Couldn't you?" said David Dawlish. "And yet it's not very difficult. 'The sins of the fathers are visited' —you know the rest. He disappeared; and every single sufferer in that crash is being paid back."

"But why that dreadful quod to-day?" pursued the soldier.

"All he could get, most likely. Boddington's cattle are pretty indifferent these days." Dawlish glanced at the stretcher, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "The damned young fool could have had the pick of my stable if he'd asked for it," he said, gruffly. "Danny —on that herring-gutted brute—at Spinner's Copse!

But he was always as proud as Lucifer, was Danny: and I'm thinking no one will ever know what he's suffered since the crash." And then, with apparently unnecessary violence, the worthy secretary blew his nose. "This cursed glare makes my eyes water," he announced, when the noise had subsided.

The cavalryman regarded the dull gloom of the old pit dispassionately.

"Quite so, Major," he murmured at length. "Er—quite so."

III

"Well, Sir Phillip?" With her father and David Dawlish, Molly was waiting in the hall to hear the verdict. The ambulance had brought the unconscious man straight to the Master's house: and for the last quarter of an hour Sir Philip Westwood, the great surgeon, who by a fortunate turn of Fate was staying at an adjoining place, had been carrying out his examination. Now he glanced at the girl, and smiled gravely.

"There is every hope, Miss Gollanfield," he said, cheerfully.

With a little sob the girl buried her face against Sir Hubert's shoulder.

"As far as I can see," continued the doctor, "there is nothing broken: only very severe bruises and a bad concussion. In a week he should be walking again."

"Thank God!" whispered the girl, and Sir Philip patted her shoulder.

"A great man," he said, "and a great deed. I'll come over to-morrow and see him again."

He walked towards the front door, followed by Sir Hubert, and the girl turned her swimming eyes on David Dawlish.

"If he'd died, Uncle David," she said, brokenly, "I—I——"

"He's not going to, Molly," interrupted the secretary. Then, after a pause, "Why did you put the spur into Nigger?" he asked, curiously.

"You saw, did you?" The girl stared at him miserably. "Because I was a little fool: because I was mad with him—because I loved him, and he called himself John Marston." She rose, and laughed a little wildly. "And then when Nigger really did bolt I was glad—glad: and when I saw him beside me, I could have sung for joy. I knew he'd come—and he did. And now I could kill myself."

And staunch old David Dawlish—uncle by right of purchase with many sweets in years gone by, if not by blood—was still thinking it over when the door of her room banged upstairs.

"A whisky and soda, Hubert," he remarked, as the latter joined him, "is clearly indicated."

"We'll have trouble with him, David," grunted the Master. "Damned quixotic young fool. He's got no right to get killed officially: it upsets all one's plans. Probably have to pass an Act of Parliament to bring him to life again."

"Leave it to Molly, old man." The secretary measured out his tot. "Leave it all to her."

"I never do anything else," sighed Sir Hubert. "What is worrying me is young Dawson."

"There's nothing really in that, is there?" David Dawlish looked a little anxiously at his old friend: as has been said before, he was no lover of young Dawson.

"There's a blood chestnut stone-dead at the bottom of a pit," returned the other. "However——"

"Quite," assented Dawlish. "Leave it to Molly: leave it all to her."

Which, taking everything into consideration, was quite the wisest decision they could have come to; it saved such a lot of breath.

They both glanced up as a hospital nurse came down the stairs. "Miss Gollanfield asked me to tell you, Sir Hubert," she remarked, "that the patient is conscious. She is sitting with him for a few minutes."

"Oh, she is, is she?" Sir Hubert rose from his chair a little doubtfully.

"Sit down, Hubert; sit down," grinned Dawlish. "Haven't we just decided to leave it all to her?"

"Well, John Marston! Feeling better?"

The man turned his head slowly on the pillow, and stared at the girl.

"What an unholy—" he muttered. "How's the horse?"

The girl looked at him steadily. "Dead—back broken. We thought you'd done the same."

"Poor brute! A grand horse." He passed one of his hands dazedly across his forehead. "I had to take

him—I couldn't have caught you on mine. I must explain things to your fiancé."

"My what?" asked the girl.

"Aren't you engaged to him?" said the man. "They told me——" The words tailed off, and he closed his eyes.

For a moment the girl looked at him with a great yearning tenderness on her face; then she bent over and laid a cool hand on his forehead.

"Go to sleep, Danny Drayton," she whispered. "Go to sleep."

But the name made him open his eyes again.

"I told you my name was John Marston," he insisted.

"Then I require an immediate explanation of why you called me darling," she answered.

He looked at her weakly; then with a little tired smile he gave in.

"Molly," he said, very low, "my little Molly. I've dreamed of you, dear; I don't think you've ever been out of my thoughts all these long years. Just for the moment—I am Danny; to-morrow I'll be John Marston again."

"Will you?" she whispered, and her face was very close to his. "Then there will be a scandal. For I don't see how John Marston and Mrs. Danny Drayton can possibly live together. My dear, dear man!"

Thus did the man in ratcatcher fall asleep, with the feel of her lips on his, and the touch of her hand on his forehead. And thus did two men find them a few moments later, only to tiptoe silently downstairs again, after one glance from the door.

"Damn this smoke," said David Dawlish, gruffly. "It's got in my eyes again."

"You're a liar, David," grunted Sir Hubert. "And a sentimental old fool besides. So am I."

II

"AN ARROW AT A VENTURE"

I

FOR the twentieth time the Man went through the whole wretched business again, in his mind. To the casual diner at the Milan, he was just an ordinary well-groomed Englishman, feeding by himself, and if he ate a little wearily, and there was a gleam of something more than sadness in the deep-set eyes, it was not sufficiently noticeable to attract attention.

"Monsieur finds everything to his satisfaction?" The head-waiter paused by the table, and the Man glanced up at him. A smile flickered round his mouth as the irony of the question struck home, and, almost unconsciously, his hand touched the letter in his coat pocket.

"Everything, thank you," he answered, gravely. "Everything, François, except the whole infernal universe."

The head-waiter shook his head sympathetically.

"I regret, Monsieur Lethbridge, that our kitchen is not large enough to keep that on the bill of fare."

"Otherwise you'd cook it to a turn and make even it palatable," said Lethbridge, bitterly. "No, it's beyond you, François; and, at the moment, it looks as

if it was beyond me. Tell 'em to bring me a half bottle of the same, will you?"

The head-waiter picked up the empty champagne bottle, and then paused for a moment. Lethbridge was an old customer, and with François that was the same as being an old friend. For years he had come to the Milan, and, latterly, he had always brought the Girl with him, a wonderful, clear-eyed, upstanding youngster, who seemed almost too young for the narrow gold ring on her left hand. And François, who had once heard him call her his Colt, had nodded his approval and been glad. It seemed an ideal marriage, and he was nothing if not sentimental. But to-night all was not well; the Colt had been a bit tricky perhaps; the snaffle had not been quite light enough in the tender mouth. And so François paused, and the eyes of the two men met.

"The younger they are, M'sieur—the more thoroughbred—the gentler must be the touch. Otherwise——" He shrugged his shoulders, and brushed an imaginary crumb from the table.

"Yes, François," said Lethbridge, slowly, "otherwise——"

"They hurt their mouths, M'sieur; and that hurts those who love them. And sometimes it's not the youngster's fault."

The next moment he was bowing some new arrivals to a table, while Hugh Lethbridge stared thoughtfully across the crowded room to where the orchestra was preparing to give their next selection.

"Sometimes it's not the youngster's fault." He took the letter out of his pocket and read it through

again, though every word of it was branded in letters of fire on his brain.

"I hope this won't give you too much of a shock," it began, "but I can't live with you any more."

"Too much of a shock!" Dear Heavens! It had been like a great, stunning blow from which he was still dazedly trying to recover.

"Nothing seems to count with you except your business and making money." Hugh's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "You grudge me every penny I spend; and then refuse to let me have my own friends."

Oh, Colt, Colt, how brutally untrue a half truth can be!

"Everything has been going wrong lately, and so I thing it's better to have a clean cut. There's no good you asking me to come back.—DORIS."

Once more Hugh Lethbridge stared across the room. A waiter placed the new bottle on the table, but he took no notice. His mind was busy with the past, and his untasted food grew cold on the plate in front of him.

It was in the summer of 1917 that Hugh Lethbridge, being on sick leave from France, met Doris Lashley for the first time. She was helping at the hospital where Hugh came to rest finally; and having once set eyes on her, he made no effort to hurry his departure unduly. The contrast between talking to Doris and wallowing in the mud-holes of Passchendaele was very pleasant; and in due course, assisted by one or two taxi-rides and some quiet dinners *à deux*, he proposed and was accepted. In October he married her; in

November he returned to France, after a fortnight's honeymoon spent in Devonshire.

He went back to his old battalion, and stagnated with them through the winter. But the stagnation was made endurable by the wonder of the girl who was his: by the remembrance of those unforgettable days and nights when he had been alone with her in the little hotel down Dawlish way; by the glory of her letters. For she was a very human girl, even though she was just a Colt. Nineteen and a half is not a very great age, and sometimes of a night Hugh would lie awake listening to the rattle of a machine-gun down the line, and the half-forgotten religion of childhood would surge through his mind. Thirty seems old to nineteen, and dim, inarticulate prayers would rise to the great brooding Spirit above that He would never let this slip of a girl down. Then sleep would come—sleep, when a kindly Fate would sometimes let him dream of her; dreams when she would come to him out of the mists, and they would stand together again in the little sandy cove with the red cliffs towering above them. She would put her hands on his shoulders, and shake him gently to and fro until, just as he was going to kiss her, a raucous voice would bellow in his ear, "Stand to." And the Heaven of imagination would change to the Hell of grey trenches just before the dawn.

In March, 1918, Hugh wangled a fortnight's leave. And at this point it is necessary to touch for a moment on that unpleasant essential to modern life—money. The girl had brought in as her contribution to the establishment the sum of one hundred pounds a year

left her by her grandmother; Hugh had about three hundred a year private means in addition to his Army pay. Before the war it had been in addition to what he was making in the City; after the war it would be the same again. And, as everyone knows, what a man may make in the City depends on a variety of circumstances, many of which are quite outside his own control. That point, however, concerns the future; and for the moment it is March, 1918—leave. Moreover, as has been said, the girl was just a Colt.

For a fortnight they lived—the Man with his eyes wide open, but not caring—at the rate of five thousand a year. They blew two hundred of the best, and loved every minute of it. Then came the German offensive, and we are not concerned with the remainder of 1918. Sufficient to say that in his wisdom—or was it his folly?—there was no addition to the family when, in February, 1919, he was demobilised, and the story proper begins.

Hugh's gratuity was just sufficient to supply the furniture for one room in the house they took near Esher. If it had been expended on lines of utility rather than those of show it would have gone farther; but the stuff was chosen by Doris one afternoon while he was at the office, and when she pointed it out to him with ill-concealed pride at the shop, he stifled his misgivings and agreed that it was charming. It was; so was the price. For the remainder of the furniture he dipped into his capital, at a time when he wanted every available penny he could lay his hands on for his business. He never spoke to Doris about money; there were so many other things to discuss as the

evenings lengthened and spring changed to early summer. They were intensely personal things, monotonous to a degree to any Philistine outsider who might have been privileged to hear them. But since they seemed to afford infinite satisfaction to the two principal performers, the feelings of a Philistine need not be considered.

And then one evening a whole variety of little things happened together. To start with, Hugh had spent the afternoon going more carefully than usual into books and ledgers, and when he had finished he lit a cigarette and stared a trifle blankly at the wall opposite. There was no doubt about it, business was rotten. Stuff which he had been promised, and for which heavy deposits had been paid, was not forthcoming. It was no fault of the firms he was dealing with; he knew that their letters of regret were real statements of fact. War-weariness, labour unrest, a hundred other almost indefinable causes were at work, and the stuff simply wasn't there to deliver. If he liked, as they had failed in their contract, he could have his deposit back, etc., etc. So ran half a dozen letters, and Hugh turned them over on his desk a little bitterly. It was no good to him having his deposit back; it was no good to him living on his capital. And there was no use mincing matters: as things stood he was making practically no income out of his work. It would adjust itself in time—that he knew. The difficulty was the immediate present and the next few months. What a pity it was he couldn't do as he would have done in the past—take rooms and live really quietly till things adjusted themselves. And then, with

a start, he realised why he couldn't, and with a quick tightening of his jaw he rose and reached for his hat. She must never know—God bless her. Hang it, things would come right soon.

He bought an evening paper on his way down, and glanced over it mechanically.

"If," had written some brilliant contributor, "the nation at large, and individuals in particular, will not realise, and that right soon, that any business or country whose expenditure exceeds its income must inevitably be ruined sooner or later——"

Hugh got no farther. He crushed the paper into a ball and flung it out of the window, muttering viciously under his breath.

"Backed a stiff 'un?" said his neighbour, sympathetically. "I've had five in succession."

He walked from the station a little quicker than usual. There was nothing for it but drastic economy; and as for any idea of the little car Doris was so keen on, it simply couldn't be done. Anyway, as the agent had told him over the phone that morning, there was no chance of delivery for at least six months. Had advised getting a secondhand one if urgently needed—except that, of course, at the present moment they were more expensive than new ones. But still one could get one at once—in fact, he had one. Only three-fifty.

Hugh hung up his hat in the hall and stepped into the drawing-room. He could see Doris outside working in the garden, but for a moment or two he made no movement to join her. His eyes were fixed on the huge, luxurious ottoman, covered with wonderful

fat cushions. It was undoubtedly the most comfortable thing he had ever sat on: it was made to be sat on, and nightly it was sat on—by both of them. It was the recipient of those intensely personal things so monotonous to the Philistine; and it had cost, with cushions and trappings complete, one hundred and twenty Bradburys.

He was still looking at it thoughtfully when the girl came in through the open window.

"I want a great big kiss, ever so quick, please," she announced, going up to him. "One more. Thank you!"

With his hands on her shoulders he held her away from him, and she smiled up into his eyes.

"I very nearly came and looked you up in your grubby old office to-day," she said, putting his tie straight. "And then I knew that I'd get on a bus going the wrong way, and I hadn't enough money for a taxi. I'd spent it all on a treat for you."

Almost abruptly his arms dropped to his sides.

"I didn't know you were coming up, darling," he said, pulling out his cigarette-case.

"Nor did I till just before I went," she answered. "Don't you want to know what the treat is?"

Without waiting for him to speak, she went on, prodding one of his waistcoat buttons gently with a little pink finger at each word.

"I bought two whopping fat peaches—one for you and one for me. They were awful expensive—seven shillings and sixpence each. And after dinner we'll eat them and make a dreffful mess."

Now, I am fully aware that any and every male

reader who may chance to arrive at this point will think that under similar circumstances he would argue thus: "The peaches were bought. After all, they were a little thing—fifteen shillings is not a fortune. Therefore, undoubtedly the thing to do was to take her in his arms, make much of her, and remark, 'You extravagant little bean—you'll break the firm if you go on like this. But I love you very much, and after we've made a dreffful mess I'm going to talk to you dreffful seriously,' or words to that effect."

My friendly male, you're quite correct. You appreciate the value of little things; you see how vastly more important they are than a stagnating business or any stupid fears as to what may happen to the being you love most in the world if——

Unfortunately, Hugh was not so wise in his time as you. That little thing seemed to be so big—it's a way of little things. It seemed bigger than the business and the motor-car and the ottoman all combined.

"My dear old thing," he said—not angrily, but just a little wearily—"have you *no* sense of the value of money?"

Then he turned and went to his own room, without looking back. And so he didn't see the look on the girl's face: the look of a child that has been spoken to sharply and doesn't understand—the look of a dog that has been beaten by the master it adores. If he had seen it there was still time—but he didn't. And when he came back five minutes later, remorseful and furious with himself, the girl was not there. She was upstairs, staring a little miserably out of the bedroom window.

And that had been the beginning of it. Sitting there in the restaurant, Hugh traced everything back to that. Of course, there had been other things, too. He saw them now clearly: a whole host of little stupid points which he had hardly thought of at the time. Business had not improved until—the irony of it—that very day, when a big deal had gone through successfully, and he had realised that the turning-point had come. He had hurried home to tell her, and had found—the letter.

Mechanically he lit a cigarette, and once again his thoughts went back over the last few months. That wretched evening when she gave him a heavy bill from her dressmaker, with a polite intimation at the bottom that something on account by return would oblige. He had had a particularly bad day; but she was his Colt, and there was no good being angry about it.

"They hurt their mouths, M'sieur." He ground out his cigarette savagely. "Handle them gently." And he had told her, when she mentioned her hundred a year, that she had already spent two in four months. It was true, but—what the devil had that got to do with it?

And then John Fordingham. Hugh's jaw set as he thought of that row. There he had been right—absolutely right. Fordingham was a man whose reputation was notorious. He specialised in young married women, and he was a very successful specialist. He was one of those men with lots of money, great personal charm, and the morals of a monkey. That was

exactly what Hugh had said to her before flatly forbidding her to have anything to do with him.

He recalled now the sudden uplift of her shoulders, the straight, level look of her eyes.

"Forbid?" she had said.

"Forbid," he had answered. "The man is an outsider of the purest water."

And he had been right—absolutely right. He took out his cigarette-case again, and even as he did so he became rigid. Coming down the steps of the restaurant was the man himself, with Doris.

For a few moments everything danced before his eyes. The blood was rushing to his head: tables, lights, the moving waiters, swam before him in a red haze. Then he shrank back behind the pillar in front and waited for them to sit down. He saw her glance towards the table at which they had usually sat—the table which he had refused to have that night; then she followed Fordingham to one which had evidently been reserved for him at the other end of the restaurant. She sat down with her back towards Hugh, and by leaning forward he could just see her neck and shoulders gleaming white through the bit of flame-coloured gauze she was wearing over her frock.

His eyes rested on her companion, and for a while Hugh studied him critically and impartially. Faultlessly turned out, he was bending towards Doris with just the right amount of deferential admiration on his face. Occasionally he smiled, showing two rows of very white teeth, and as he talked he moved his hands in little gestures which were more foreign than English.

They were well-shaped hands, perfectly manicured, a fact of which their owner was fully aware.

After a time Fordingham ceased to do the talking. The occasional smiles showed no more; a serious look, with just a hint of slave-like devotion in it, showed on his face as he listened to Doris. Once or twice he shook his head thoughtfully; once or twice he allowed his eyes to meet hers with an expression which required no interpretation.

"My poor child," it said; "my poor little hardly used girl. Don't you know that I love you, tenderly, devotedly? But, of course, I couldn't dream of saying so. I'm only just a friend."

It was so utterly obvious to the man behind the pillar, that for a while he watched them with the same disinterested feeling that he would have watched a play.

"She's telling him what a rotten life she's had," he reflected, cynically. "Her husband doesn't understand her. Fordingham answers the obvious cue with a soulful look. If only he had been the husband in question, there would have been no misunderstanding. Perhaps not. Only a broken heart, my Colt, that's all."

He looked up as François stopped in front of his table.

"She doesn't know I'm here, does she?" asked Hugh, quietly.

"No, M'sieur." The head-waiter glanced a little sadly at the two heads so close together.

Hugh took a piece of paper from his pocket, and scribbled a few words on it in pencil.

"I don't want her to know—at least, not yet. Would

you ask the orchestra to play that?" He handed the slip across the table. "It's important." And then, "Wait, François; I want to find out where she goes to after dinner. It's too late now for a theatre, and I expect she's staying at an hotel. Can you do that for me?"

The head-waiter nodded in silence, and moved away. Very few men would have asked him to do such a thing; he would have done it for still fewer. But this was an exception, and tragedy is never far off when the Fordinghams of this world dine with youngsters who have run away from their husbands.

Hugh, with an eagerness which almost suffocated him, waited for the first bars of the waltz he had asked the orchestra to play. The last time he had heard it, he had been dining at the Milan with Doris. It was their favourite waltz; on every programme they had made a point of dancing it together. Would she remember? Would it break through the wretched wall of misunderstanding, and carry her back to the days when it was just they two, and there was nothing else that mattered in the whole wide world?

The haunting melody stole gently through the room, and, with his heart pounding madly, Hugh Lethbridge watched his wife. At the very first note she sat up abruptly, and with a grim triumph Hugh saw the look of sudden surprise on her companion's face. Then, very slowly, she turned and stared at their usual table. Her lips were parted, and to the man who watched so eagerly it seemed as if she were breathing a little quickly. Almost he fancied he could see a look of

dawning wonder in her eyes, like a child awakening in a strange room.

Then she turned away, and sat motionless till the music sobbed into silence. And as her companion joined in the brief perfunctory applause, Hugh's glance for a moment rested on François. The head-waiter was smiling gently to himself.

Five minutes later she rose, and Fordingham, with a quick frown, got up with her. That acute judge of feminine nature was under no delusions as to what had happened, and behind the smiling mask of his face he cursed the orchestra individually and comprehensively. Quite obviously a girl not to be rushed; he had been congratulating himself on the progress made during dinner. In fact, he had been distinctly hopeful that the fruit was ripe for the plucking that very night. And now that confounded tune had wakened memories. And memories are the devil with women.

He adjusted her opera-cloak, and followed her to the door. Things would have to be handled carefully in the car going back, very carefully. One false word, and the girl would shy like a wild thing. He was thankful that he had already told her quite casually that by an extraordinary coincidence he was stopping at the same hotel as she was. At the time it had seemed to make not the slightest impression on her; she had not even required the usual glib lie that his flat was being done up.

He helped her into the car and spoke to the chauffeur. And a large man in a gorgeous uniform, having given a message to a small page-boy, watched the big Daimler glide swiftly down Piccadilly.

"Madame has gone to the Magnificent, M'sieur," were the words with which François roused Hugh from his reverie, a few minutes later.

"She remembered, François; she remembered that tune."

"Oui, M'sieur—she remembered. You must not let her forget again. Monsieur Fordingham is——" He hesitated, and left his sentence unfinished.

"Mr. Fordingham is a blackguard," said Hugh, grimly. "And I'm a fool. So between us she hasn't had much of a show."

"Monsieur is going to the Magnificent?" François pulled back his table.

"I am, François"—shortly.

"Be easy, Monsieur. Be gentle. Don't hurt her mouth again——" He bowed as was befitting to an old customer. "Good-night, Monsieur. Will you be dining to-morrow?"

"That depends, *mon ami*. Perhaps——"

"I think you will, M'sieur. At that table——" With a smile he pointed to the usual one. "I will order your dinner myself—for two."

II

It had not occurred to Hugh before; for some reason or other it had not even entered his mind. And then, with a sudden crushing force, the two names leaped at him from the page of the register at the Magnificent, and for the moment numbed him.

"Doris Lethbridge," and then, a dozen lines below, "John Fordingham." What a fool, what a short-

sighted fool, he was! Good God! did he not know Fordingham's reputation? And yet, through some inexplicable freak of mind, this development had not so much as crossed his brain. And there he had been sitting at his club for over an hour, in order to ensure seeing the Colt in her room and avoid any chance of having a scene downstairs.

Dimly he realised the clerk was speaking.

"Number seven hundred and ten, sir; and since you have no luggage, we must ask for a deposit of a pound."

"I see," said Hugh, speaking with a sort of deadly calmness, "that a great friend of mine is stopping here—Mr. Fordingham. When—er—did he take his room?"

"Mr. Fordingham?" The clerk glanced at the book. "Some time this afternoon, sir. He is upstairs now; would you like me to ring up his room?"

"No, thank you; I won't disturb him at this hour." He pushed a pound note across the desk and turned slowly away. Half unconsciously he walked over to the lift and stepped inside.

"Doris Lethbridge—John Fordingham." Oh! dear God!

"What number, sir?" The lift-man was watching him a trifle curiously.

"Six hundred and ninety-four," said Hugh, mechanically. "No—seven hundred and ten, I mean."

"They are both on the same floor," said the man, concealing a smile. At the Magnificent slight confusion as to numbers of rooms was not unknown.

"Doris Lethbridge—John Fordingham!"

The lift shot up, and still the names danced madly before his eyes. Every pulse in his body was hammering; wave upon wave of emotion rose in his throat, choking him; his mouth seemed parched and dry.

"Doris Lethbridge—John Fordingham!"

"To the right, sir, for both rooms."

The door shut behind him and the lift sank rapidly out of sight. For a moment he stood in the long, deserted passage; then slowly, almost falteringly, he walked along it.

Six hundred and ninety. A pair of brown boots were outside, and Hugh stopped and looked at them critically.

"An unpleasant colour," he reflected; "most unpleasant."

A passing chambermaid glanced at him suspiciously, but Hugh stared right through her. He was supremely unconscious of her existence; only those two names mocked him wherever he looked, and the pair of unpleasant brown boots. He wondered if their owner was equally unpleasant.

Slowly he walked on. Six hundred and ninety-three —six hundred and ninety-four. He staggered a little, and leaned for a moment against the wall. Then, very deliberately, he pulled himself together and listened. There was no sound coming from the room at all. He listened for voices, but all was silent; and then suddenly he heard the click of a cupboard door closing.

So Doris was inside. Doris was inside—and—— Hugh took a deep breath; then he knocked.

"Who's there?" The Colt's voice, a little startled,

came from the room, and Hugh's heart gave a great suffocating jump. His lips moved, but only a hoarse whisper came. He heard steps coming towards the door; the handle turned, and the next moment he was looking into the Colt's eyes.

For one second there shone in them the look of a great joy. Then she frowned quickly.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "I don't want to see you at all."

He pushed past her into the room, and for a while the relief was so wonderful that he could only stand there staring at her foolishly. Then at last he found his voice.

"Oh, my Colt," he whispered, brokenly, "thank God I've found you!" She closed the door and came slowly towards him. "Thank God I've found you—in time!" He said the last two words under his breath, but she heard them.

"What do you mean by 'in time'?" she said, and her voice showed no sign of relenting. "If you think I'm going to come home with you, you're quite wrong. Besides," she added, irrelevantly, "the last train's a beastly one. It stops everywhere."

Hugh looked at her with a faint smile, and then sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Colt," he said, slowly, "am I the biggest brute in the world? Am I a cad, and a poisonous beast? Am I, Colt?"

She stared at him, a little perplexed; then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Certainly not," she answered. "You're merely an inconsiderate and selfish man."

"Because," he went on, ignoring her remark, "if it's any gratification to you to know it, I should have to be everything I said to deserve such a punishment as you've given me."

"I don't see it at all," she remarked. "But—as a matter of fact—if you want to know, I wasn't going to stay away for good, as I said in my letter. I was going to come back in a week or so."

"What made you change your mind?" he asked, quietly.

"Something which happened to-night."

For a moment his collar felt strangely tight.

"Something which recalled you as you used to be—not as you are now. It made me determine to give you another chance."

"Ah—h!" A great sigh of relief came from the man. "Was it—a piece of music?"

She looked at him quickly.

"How did you know?"

"An arrow at a venture," he answered. "Was it Our Tune?"

"Yes—it was."

"And where did you hear it?"

"At the restaurant where I was dining." She lit a cigarette with studied indifference. "The Milan. I dined there with Mr. Fordingham."

Hugh nodded thoughtfully.

"They give you good grub there, don't they? I see Fordingham is stopping here."

"Is he?" said the girl. "I believe, now you mention it, he did say something about it." She was looking away, and did not see the sudden penetrating glance

from the man on the bed. And he—in that one vital moment—knew, and was utterly and completely happy. His Colt was as innocent as a little child, and nothing else mattered on God's earth. Then, through the great joy which was singing in his brain, he heard her speaking again.

"I like Mr. Fordingham, Hugh. And you will have to understand that if I consent to come back to you, it will only be on the condition that if I want to I can go out and dine with him."

It was at that moment that once again there came a knock on the door.

The Colt looked up quickly, and Hugh rose.

"In case it's a message," he whispered, "I'll get over here."

He moved to a place where he could not be seen, and waited. On his face there was a grim smile as he watched her cross the room. In his mind there was absolute certainty as to who had knocked. If she wanted to, after this, she should dine with Fordingham as much as she wished.

She opened the door, and stopped in amazement.

"Mr. Fordingham!" she gasped. "What on earth do you want?"

With a quick movement Fordingham stepped into the room and shut the door.

"What do I want?" he answered, in the low, vibrant tone that was generally very successful. "Why, you, my darling little girl." Engrossed in his desire he failed to notice Hugh, who was leaning on a chest of drawers watching the scene. He also failed to notice that the look of blank amazement on the Colt's face

had been succeeded by one of outraged fury. "Give him up, little girl," he went on, "give him up and come to me."

The next moment he staggered back, with a hand to his cheek.

"You little spitfire," he snarled, and then quite suddenly he stood very still. For Hugh's voice, clear and faintly amused, was speaking.

"Good for you, Colt. Now the other cheek."

The sound of a second blow rang through the room, and Hugh laughed gently.

"I—I—" stammered Fordingham. "There's been a mistake. I—I—must apologise. The wrong room——"

He stood cringing by the door, staring fearfully at Hugh, who had left his position by the chest of drawers, and was standing in front of him.

"You lie, you miserable hound," said Lethbridge, contemptuously. "You've made a mistake right enough; but it was not a mistake in the matter of the room. You deliberately planned the whole show, and now—" he took him by the collar, "you can reap the reward."

He shook Fordingham, as a terrier shakes a rat; then he flung him into a corner.

"Open the door, Colt," he said, quietly, "and we'll throw the mess into the passage."

The mess did not wait to be thrown; it gathered unto itself legs, and departed rapidly.

"Hang it!" said Hugh, as he closed the door, "I've nearly broken my toe on him."

He limped to the bed, where he sat rubbing his foot.

Just once he stole a glance at the Colt, who was standing rigidly by the mantelpiece; then he resumed the rubbing. And on his face there was a faint, tender smile.

Then the massage ceased as a pair of soft arms came round his neck from behind.

"Boy! oh, boy!" and her mouth was very close to his ear. "You don't think—oh! tell me you don't think—that I——"

He put his hand over her mouth.

"It's no question of thinking, my Colt, I know——" For a while he stared at the face so close to his own; then very gently he kissed her on the lips. "I know—I was at the Milan myself to-night, Colt—behind a pillar. I told 'em to play Our Tune."

He stood up and smiled at her.

"We'll manage the show better now. I've been worried; I've been a fool. I won't be any more. And now it's time you went to bed." He turned away abruptly. "I'll be getting off to my own room."

But she was at the door before him, arms outstretched, barring the way.

"Just wait a moment," she cried, a little breathlessly, "I want to telephone before—before you go——"

"Telephone!" His surprise showed on his face. "At this hour?"

But the Colt was already speaking.

"Halloa! Is that the office? Oh, it's Mrs. Lethbridge speaking. My husband has suddenly arrived. He has a room here, so could you give us a double

room, in exchange for our two singles? You can? Thank you."

She replaced the receiver and turned to the Man.

"There are a whole lot of things I don't understand," she said, demurely, "and it won't be any more expensive."

But the Man had her in his arms.

"My Colt!" he whispered, triumphantly. "My Colt!"

III

THE HOUSE BY THE HEADLAND

YOU'LL no get there, zurr. There'll be a rare storm this night. Best bide here, and be going to-morrow morning after 'tis over."

The warning of my late host, weather-wise through years of experience, rang through my brain as I reached the top of the headland, and, too late, I cursed myself for not having heeded his words. With a gasp I flung my pack down on the ground, and loosened my collar. Seven miles behind me lay the comfortable inn where I had lunched; eight miles in front the one where I proposed to dine. And midway between them was I, dripping with perspiration and panting for breath.

Not a puff of air was stirring; not a sound broke the death-like stillness, save the sullen, lazy beat of the sea against the rocks below. Across the horizon, as far as the eye could see, stretched a mighty bank of black cloud, which was spreading slowly and relentlessly over the whole heaven. Already its edge was almost overhead, and as I felt the first big drop of rain on my forehead, I cursed myself freely once again. If only I had listened to mine host: if only I was still in his comfortable oak-beamed coffee-room, drinking his most excellent ale. . . . I felt convinced

he was the type of man who would treat such trifles as regulation hours with the contempt they deserved. And, even as I tasted in imagination the bite of the grandest of all drinks on my parched tongue, and looked through the glass bottom of the tankard at the sanded floor, the second great drop of rain splashed on my face. For a moment or two I wavered. Should I go back that seven miles, and confess myself a fool? or should I go on the further eight and hope that the next cellar would be as good as the last? In either case I was bound to get drenched to the skin, and at length I made up my mind. I would not turn back for any storm, and the matter of the quality of the ale must remain on the laps of the gods. And at that moment, like a solid wall of water, the rain came.

I have travelled into most corners of the world, in the course of forty years' wanderings; I have been through the monsoon going south to Singapore from Japan, I have been caught on the edge of a water-spout in the South Sea Islands; but I have never known anything like the rain which came down that June evening on the south-west coast of England. In half a minute every garment I wore was soaked; the hills and the sea were blotted out, and I stumbled forward blindly, unable to see more than a yard in front of me. Then, almost as abruptly as it had started, the rain ceased. I could feel the water squelching in my boots, and trickling down my back, as I kept steadily descending into the valley beyond the headland. There was nothing for it now but to go through with it. I couldn't get any wetter than I was; so that, when I suddenly rounded a little knoll and saw in front a

low-lying, rambling house, the idea of sheltering there did not at once occur to me. I glanced at it casually in the semi-darkness, and was trudging past the gate, my mind busy with other things, when a voice close behind me made me stop with a sudden start. A man was speaking, and a second before I could have sworn I was alone.

"A bad night, sir," he remarked, in a curiously deep voice, "and it will be worse soon. The thunder and lightning is nearly over. Will you not come in and shelter? I can supply you with a change of clothes if you are wet."

"You are very good, sir," I answered slowly, peering at the tall, gaunt figure beside me. "But I think I will be getting on, thank you all the same."

"As you like," he answered indifferently, and even as he spoke a vivid flash of lightning quivered and died in the thick blackness of the sky, and almost instantaneously a deafening crash of thunder seemed to come from just over our heads. "As you like," he repeated, "but I shall be glad of your company if you cared to stay the night."

It was a kind offer, though in a way the least one would expect in similar circumstances, and I hesitated. Undoubtedly there was little pleasure to be anticipated in an eight-mile tramp under such conditions, and yet there was something—something indefinable, incoherent—which said to me insistently: "Go on; don't stop. Go on."

I shook myself in annoyance, and my wet clothes clung to me clammily. Was I, at my time of life,

nervous, because a man had spoken to me unexpectedly?

"I think if I may," I said, "I will change my mind and avail myself of your kind offer. It is no evening for walking for pleasure."

Without a word he led the way into the house, and I followed. Even in the poor light I could see that the garden was badly kept, and that the path leading to the front door was covered with weeds. Bushes, wet with the rain, hung in front of our faces, dripping dismally on to the ground; and green moss filled the cracks of the two steps leading up to the door, giving the impression almost of a mosaic.

Inside the hall was in darkness, and I waited while he opened the door into one of the rooms. I heard him fumbling for a match, and at that moment another blinding flash lit up the house as if it had been day. I had a fleeting vision of the stairs—a short, broad flight—with a window at the top; of two doors, one apparently leading to the servants' quarters, the other opposite the one my host had already opened. But most vivid of all in that quick photograph was the condition of the hall itself. Three or four feet above my head a lamp hung from the ceiling, and from it, in every direction, there seemed to be spiders' webs coated with dust and filth. They stretched to every picture; they stretched to the top of all the doors. One long festoon was almost brushing against my face, and for a moment a wave of unreasoning panic filled me. Almost did I turn and run, so powerful was it; then, with an effort, I pulled myself together. For a grown man to become nervous of a spider's web is rather too

much of a good thing, and after all it was none of my business. In all probability the man was a recluse, who was absorbed in more important matters than the cleanliness of his house. Though how he could stand the smell—dank and rotten—defeated me. It came to my nostrils as I stood there, waiting for him to strike a match, and the scent of my own wet Harris tweed failed to conceal it. It was the smell of an unlived-in house, grown damp and mildewed with years of neglect, and once again I shuddered. Confound the fellow! Would he never get the lamp lit? I didn't mind his spiders' webs and the general filth of his hall, provided I could get some dry clothes on.

"Come in." I looked up to see him standing in the door. "I regret that there seems to be no oil in the lamp, but there are candles on the mantelpiece, should you care to light them."

Somewhat surprised I stepped into the room, and then his next remark made me halt in amazement.

"When my wife comes down, I must ask her about the oil. Strange of her to have forgotten."

Wife! What manner of woman could this be who allowed her house to get into such a condition of dirt and neglect? And were there no servants? However, again, it was none of my business, and I felt in my pocket for matches. Luckily they were in a water-tight box, and with a laugh I struck one and lit the candles.

"It's so infernally dark," I remarked, "that the stranger within the gates requires a little light, to get his bearings."

In some curiosity I glanced at my host's face in the

flickering light. As yet I had had no opportunity of observing him properly, but now as unostentatiously as possible I commenced to study it. Cadaverous, almost to the point of emaciation, he had a ragged, bristly moustache, while his hair, plentifully flecked with grey, was brushed untidily back from his forehead. But dominating everything were his eyes, which glowed and smouldered from under his bushy eyebrows, till they seemed to burn into me.

More and more I found myself regretting the fact that I had accepted his offer. His whole manner was so strange that for the first time doubts as to his sanity began to creep into my mind. And to be alone with a madman in a deserted house, miles from any other habitation, with a terrific thunderstorm raging, was not a prospect which appealed to me greatly. Then I remembered his reference to his wife, and felt more reassured. . . .

"You and your wife must find it lonely here," I hazarded, when the silence had lasted some time.

"Why should my wife feel the loneliness?" he answered harshly. "She has me—her husband. . . . What more does a woman require?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing," I replied, hastily, deeming discretion the better part of veracity. "Wonderful air; beautiful view. I wonder if I could have a dry coat as you so kindly suggested?"

I took off my own wet one as I spoke, and threw it over the back of a chair. Then, receiving no answer to my request, I looked at my host. His back was half towards me, and he was staring into the hall outside. He stood quite motionless, and as apparently he had

failed to hear me, I was on the point of repeating my remark when he turned and spoke to me again.

"A pleasant surprise for my wife, sir, don't you think? She was not expecting me home until to-morrow morning."

"Very," I assented. . . .

"Eight miles have I walked, in order to prevent her being alone. That should answer your remark about her feeling the loneliness."

He peered at me fixedly, and I again assented.

"Most considerate of you," I murmured, "most considerate."

But the man only chuckled by way of answer, and, swinging round, continued to stare into the gloomy, filthy hall.

Outside the storm was increasing in fury. Flash followed flash with such rapidity that the whole sky westwards formed into a dancing sheet of flame, while the roll of the thunder seemed like the continuous roar of a bombardment with heavy guns. But I was aware of it only subconsciously; my attention was concentrated on the gaunt man standing so motionless in the centre of the room. So occupied was I with him that I never heard his wife's approach until suddenly, looking up, I saw that by the door there stood a woman—a woman who paid no attention to me, but only stared fearfully at her husband, with a look of dreadful terror in her eyes. She was young, far younger than the man—and pretty in a homely, countrified way. And as she stared at the gaunt, cadaverous husband she seemed to be trying to speak, while ceaselessly she twisted a wisp of a pocket-handkerchief in her hands.

"I didn't expect you home so soon, Rupert," she stammered at length. "Have you had a good day?"

"Excellent," he answered, and his eyes seemed to glow more fiendishly than ever. "And now I have come home to my little wife, and her loving welcome."

She laughed a forced, unnatural laugh, and came a few steps into the room.

"There is no oil in the lamp, my dear," he continued, suavely. "Have you been too busy to remember to fill it?"

"I will go and get some," she said, quickly turning towards the door.

But the man's hand shot out and caught her arm, and at his touch she shrank away, cowering.

"I think not," he cried, harshly. "We will sit in the darkness, my dear, and—wait."

"How mysterious you are, Rupert!" She forced herself to speak lightly. "What are we going to wait for?"

But the man only laughed—a low, mocking chuckle —and pulled the girl nearer to him.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, Mary? It's such a long time since you kissed me—a whole twelve hours."

The girl's free hand clenched tight, but she made no other protest as her husband took her in his arms and kissed her. Only it seemed to me that her whole body was strained and rigid, as if to brace herself to meet a caress she loathed. . . . In fact the whole situation was becoming distinctly embarrassing. The man seemed to have completely forgotten my existence, and the girl so far had not even looked at me. Undoubtedly a peculiar couple, and a peculiar house.

Those cobwebs: I couldn't get them out of my mind.

"Hadn't I better go and fill the lamp now?" she asked after a time. "Those candles give a very poor light, don't they?"

"Quite enough for my purpose, my dear wife," replied the man. "Come and sit down and talk to me."

With his hand still holding her arm he drew her to a sofa, and side by side they sat down. I noticed that all the time he was watching her covertly out of the corner of his eye, while she stared straight in front of her as if she was waiting for something to happen. . . . And at that moment a door banged, upstairs.

"What's that?" The girl half rose, but the man pulled her back.

"The wind, my dear," he chuckled. "What else could it be? The house is empty save for us."

"Hadn't I better go up and see that all the windows are shut?" she said, nervously. "This storm makes me feel frightened."

"That's why I hurried back to you, my love. I couldn't bear to think of you spending to-night alone." Again he chuckled horribly, and peered at the girl beside him. "I said to myself, 'She doesn't expect me back till to-morrow morning. I will surprise my darling wife, and go back home to-night.' Wasn't it kind of me, Mary?"

"Of course it was, Rupert," she stammered. "Very kind of you. I think I'll just go up and put on a jersey. I'm feeling a little cold."

She tried to rise, but her husband still held her; and then suddenly there came on her face such a look of

pitiable terror that involuntarily I took a step forward. She was staring at the door, and her lips were parted as if to cry out, when the man covered her mouth with his free hand and dragged her brutally to her feet.

"Alone, my wife—all alone," he snarled. "My dutiful, loving wife all alone. What a good thing I returned to keep her company!"

For a moment or two she struggled feebly; then he half carried, half forced her close by me to a position behind the open door. I could have touched them as they passed; but I seemed powerless to move. Instinctively I knew what was going to happen; but I could do nothing save stand and stare at the door, while the girl, half fainting, crouched against the wall, and her husband stood over her motionless and terrible. And thus we waited, while the candles guttered in their sockets, listening to the footsteps which were coming down the stairs. . . .

Twice I strove to call out; twice the sound died away in my throat. I felt as one does in some awful nightmare, when a man cries aloud and no sound comes, or runs his fastest and yet does not move. In it, I was yet not of it; it was as if I was the spectator of some inexorable tragedy with no power to intervene.

The steps came nearer. They were crossing the hall now—the cobwebby hall—and the next moment I saw a young man standing in the open door.

"Mary, where are you, my darling?" He came into the room and glanced around. And, as he stood there, one hand in his pocket, smiling cheerily, the

man behind the door put out his arm and gripped him by the shoulder. In an instant the smile vanished, and the youngster spun round, his face set and hard.

"Here is your darling, John Trelawnay," said the husband quietly. "What do you want with her?"

"Ah!" The youngster's breath came a little faster, as he stared at the older man. "You've come back unexpectedly, have you? It's the sort of damned dirty trick you would play."

I smiled involuntarily: this was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance.

"What are you doing in this house alone with my wife, John Trelawnay?" Into the quiet voice had crept a note of menace, and, as I glanced at the speaker and noticed the close clenching and unclenching of his powerful hands, I realised that there was going to be trouble. The old, old story again, but, rightly or wrongly, with every sympathy of mine on the side of the sinners.

"Your wife by a trick only, Rupert Carlingham," returned the other hotly. "You know she's never loved you; you know she has always loved me."

"Nevertheless—my wife. But I ask you again, what are you doing in this house while I am away?"

"Did you expect us to stand outside in the storm?" muttered the other.

For a moment the elder man's eyes blazed, and I thought he was going to strike the youngster. Then, with an effort, he controlled himself, and his voice was ominously quiet as he spoke again.

"You lie, John Trelawnay." His brooding eyes never left the other's face. "It was no storm that

drove you here to-day; no thunder that made you call my wife your darling. You came because you knew I was away; because you thought—you and your mistress—that I should not return till to-morrow."

For a while he was silent, while the girl still crouched against the wall, staring at him fearfully, and the youngster, realising the hopelessness of further denial, faced him with folded arms. In silence I watched them from the shadow beyond the fireplace, wondering what I ought to do. There is no place for any outsider in such a situation, much less a complete stranger; and had I consulted my own inclinations I would have left the house there and then and chanced the storm still raging outside. I got as far as putting on my coat again, and making a movement towards the door, when the girl looked at me with such an agony of entreaty in her eyes that I paused. Perhaps it was better that I should stop; perhaps if things got to a head, and the men started fighting, I might be of some use.

And at that moment Rupert Carlingham threw back his head and laughed. It echoed and re-echoed through the room, peal after peal of maniacal laughter, while the girl covered her face with her hands and shrank away, and the youngster, for all his pluck, retreated a few steps. The man was mad, there was no doubt about it: and the laughter of a madman is perhaps the most awful thing a human being may hear.

Quickly I stepped forward; it seemed to me that if I was to do anything at all the time had now come.

"I think, Mr. Carlingham," I said, firmly, "that a

little quiet discussion would be of advantage to everyone."

He ceased laughing, and stared at me in silence. Then his eyes left my face and fixed themselves again on the youngster. It was useless; he was blind to everything except his own insensate rage. And, before I could realise his intention, he sprang.

"You'd like me to divorce her, wouldn't you?" he snarled, as his hand sought John Trelawnay's throat. "So that you could marry her. . . . But I'm not going to—no. I know a better thing than divorce."

The words were choked on his lips by the youngster's fist, which crashed again and again into his face; but the man seemed insensible to pain. They swayed backwards and forwards, while the lightning, growing fainter and fainter in the distance, quivered through the room from time to time, and the two candles supplied the rest of the illumination. Never for an instant did the madman relax his grip on the youngster's throat: never for an instant did the boy cease his sledge-hammer blows on the other's face. But he was tiring, it was obvious; no normal flesh and blood could stand the frenzied strength against him. And, suddenly, it struck me that murder was being done, in front of my eyes.

With a shout I started forward—somehow they must be separated. And then I stopped motionless again: the girl had slipped past me with her face set and hard. With a strength for which I would not have given her credit she seized both her husband's legs about the knees, and lifted his feet off the ground, so that his only support was the grip of his left hand

on the youngster's throat, and the girl's arms about his knees. He threw her backwards and forwards as if she had been a child, but still she clung on, and then, in an instant, it was all over. His free right hand had been forgotten. . . .

I saw the boy sway nearer in his weakness, and the sudden flash of a knife. There was a little choking gurgle, and they all crashed down together, with the youngster underneath. And when the madman rose the boy lay still, with the shaft of the knife sticking out from his coat above his heart.

It was then that Rupert Carlingham laughed again, while his wife, mad with grief, knelt beside the dead boy, pillowing his head on her lap. For what seemed an eternity I stood watching, unable to move or speak; then the murderer bent down and swung his wife over his shoulder. And, before I realised what he was going to do, he had left the room, and I saw him passing the window outside.

The sight galvanised me into action; there was just a possibility I might avert a double tragedy. With a loud shout I dashed out of the front door, and down the ill-kept drive; but when I got to the open ground he seemed to have covered an incredible distance, considering his burden. I could see him shambling over the turf, up the side of the valley which led to the headland where the rain had caught me; and, as fast as I could, I followed him, shouting as I ran. But it was no use—gain on him I could not. Steadily, with apparent ease, he carried the girl up the hill, taking no more notice of my cries than he had of my presence earlier in the evening. And, with the water squelching

from my boots, I ran after him—no longer wasting my breath on shouting, but saving it all in my frenzied endeavour to catch him before it was too late. For once again I knew what was going to happen, even as I had known when I heard the footsteps coming down the stairs.

I was still fifty yards from him when he reached the top of the cliff; and for a while he paused there, silhouetted against the angry sky. He seemed to be staring out to sea, and the light from the flaming red sunset, under the black of the storm, shone on his great, gaunt figure, bathing it in a wonderful splendour. The next moment he was gone. . . . I heard him give one loud cry; then he sprang into space with the girl still clasped in his arms.

And when I reached the spot and peered over, only the low booming of the sullen Atlantic three hundred feet below came to my ears. . . . That, and the mocking shrieks of a thousand gulls. Of the madman and his wife there was no sign.

At last I got up and started to walk away mechanically. I felt that somehow I was to blame for the tragedy, that I should have done something, taken a hand in that grim fight. And yet I knew that if I was called upon it witness it again, I should act in the same way. I should feel as powerless to move as I had felt in that ill-omened house, with the candles guttering on the mantelpiece, and the lightning flashing through the dirty window. Even now I seemed to be moving in a dream, and after a while I stopped and made a determined effort to pull myself together.

"You will go back," I said out loud, "to that house. And you will make sure that that boy is dead. You are a grown man, and not a hysterical woman. You will go back."

And as if in answer a seagull screamed discordantly above my head. Not for five thousand pounds would I have gone back to that house alone, and when I argued with myself and said, "You are a fool, and a coward," the gull shrieked mockingly again.

"What is there to be afraid of?" I cried. "A dead body; and you have seen many hundreds."

It was as I asked the question out loud that I came to a road and sat down beside it. It was little more than a track, but it seemed to speak of other human beings, and I wanted human companionship at the moment—wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. At any other time I would have resented sharing with strangers the glorious beauty of the moors as they stretched back to a rugged tor a mile or two away, with their wonderful colouring of violet and black, and the scent of the wet earth rising all around. But now . . .

With a shudder I rose, conscious for the first time that I was feeling chilled. I must get somewhere—talk to someone; and, as if in answer to my thoughts, a car came suddenly in sight, bumping over the track.

There was an elderly man inside, and two girls, and he pulled up at once on seeing me.

"By Jove!" he cried, cheerily, "you're very wet. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"It is very good of you," I said. "I want to get to the police as quickly as possible."

"The police?" He stared at me, surprised. "What's wrong?"

"There has been a most ghastly tragedy," I said. "A man has been murdered and the murderer has jumped over that headland, with his wife in his arms. The murderer's name was Rupert Carlingham."

I was prepared for my announcement startling them; I was not prepared for the extraordinary effect it produced. With a shriek of terror the two girls clung together, and the man's ruddy face went white.

"What name did you say?" he said at length, in a shaking voice.

"Rupert Carlingham," I answered, curtly. "And the boy he murdered was called John Trelawnay. Incidentally I want to get a doctor to look at the youngster. It's possible the knife might have just missed his heart."

"Oh, daddy, drive on, drive on quick!" implored the girls, and I glanced at them in slight surprise. After all a murder is a very terrible thing, but it struck me they were becoming hysterical over it.

"It was just such an evening," said the man, slowly: "just such a storm as we've had this afternoon, that it happened."

"That what happened?" I cried, a trifle irritably; but he made no answer, and only stared at me curiously.

"Do you know these parts, sir?" he said at length.

"It's the first time I've ever been here," I answered. "I'm on a walking tour."

"Ah! A walking tour. Well, I'm a doctor myself, and unless you get your clothes changed pretty quickly,

I predict that your walking tour will come to an abrupt conclusion—even if it's only a temporary one. Now, put on this coat, and we'll get off to a good inn."

But, anxious as I was to fall in with his suggestion myself, I felt that that was more than I could do.

"It's very good of you, doctor," I said; "but, seeing that you are a medical man, I really must ask you to come and look at this youngster first. I'd never forgive myself if by any chance he wasn't dead. As a matter of fact, I've seen death too often not to recognise it, and the boy was stabbed clean through the heart right in front of my eyes—but . . ."

I broke off, as one of the girls leaned forward and whispered to her father. But he only shook his head, and stared at me curiously.

"Did you make no effort to stop the murder?" he asked at length.

It was the question I had been dreading, the question I knew must come sooner or later. But, now that I was actually confronted with it, I had no answer ready. I could only shake my head and stammer out confusedly:

"It seems incredible for a man of my age and experience to confess it, doctor—but I didn't. I couldn't. . . . I was just going to try and separate them, when the girl rushed in . . . and . . ."

"What did she do?" It was one of the daughters who fired the question at me so suddenly that I looked at her in amazement. "What did Mary do?"

"She got her husband by the knees," I said, "and hung on like a bull-dog. But he'd got a grip on the

boy's throat and then—suddenly—it was all over. They came crashing down as he stabbed young Trelawnay." Once again the girls clung together, shuddering, and I turned to the doctor. "I wish you'd come, doctor: it's only just a step. I can show you the house."

"I know the house, sir, very well," he answered, gravely. Then he put his arms on the steering-wheel and for a long time sat motionless, staring into the gathering dusk, while I fidgeted restlessly, and the girls whispered together. What on earth was the man waiting for? I wondered: after all, it wasn't a very big thing to ask of a doctor. . . . At last he got down from the car and stood beside me on the grass.

"You've never been here before, sir?" he asked again, looking at me fixedly.

"Never," I answered, a shade brusquely. "And I'm not altogether bursting with a desire to return."

"Strange," he muttered. "Very, very strange. I will come with you."

For a moment he spoke to his daughters as if to reassure them; then, together we walked over the springy turf towards the house by the headland. He seemed in no mood for conversation, and my own mind was far too busy with the tragedy for idle talk.

But he asked me one question when we were about fifty yards from the house.

"Rupert Carlingham carried his wife up to the headland, you say?"

"Slung over his shoulder," I answered, "and then . . ."

But the doctor had stopped short, and was staring at

the house, while, once again, every vestige of colour had left his face.

"My God!" he muttered, "there's a light in the room. . . . A light, man; don't you see it?"

"I left the candles burning," I said, impatiently. "Really, doctor, I suppose murder doesn't often come your way, but . . ."

I walked on quickly and he followed. Really, the fuss was getting on my nerves, already distinctly ragged. The front door was open as I had left it, and I paused for a moment in the cobwebby hall. Then, pulling myself together, I stepped into the room where the body lay, to halt and stare open-mouthed at the floor. . . .

The candles still flickered on the mantelpiece; the furniture was as I had left it; but of the body of John Trelawnay there was not a trace. It had vanished utterly and completely.

"I don't understand, doctor," I muttered foolishly. "I left the body lying there."

The doctor stood at the door beside me, and suddenly I realised that his eyes were fixed on me.

"I know," he said, and his voice was grave and solemn. "With the head near that chair."

"Why, how do you know?" I cried, amazed. "Have you taken the body away?"

But he answered my question by another.

"Do you notice anything strange in this room, sir?" he asked. "On the floor?"

"Only a lot of dust," I remarked.

"Precisely," he said. "And one would expect foot-

prints in dust. I see yours going to the mantelpiece; I see no others."

I clutched his arm, as his meaning came to me.

"My God!" I whispered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that Rupert Carlingham murdered John Trelawnay, and then killed himself and his wife, five years ago . . . during just such another storm as we have had this evening."

IV

THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT PLAY CARDS

I

"THANKS very much, but as I told you before—I don't play cards."

The speaker, a tall, bronzed man whose clear eye and slightly weather-beaten face proclaimed him to be no dweller in cities, paused at the smoking-room door, and stared, a little deliberately, at the man who had just accosted him. It was the second time that day that this same gentleman had endeavoured to rope him into a game of poker—"just small stakes, you know"—and Hugh Massingham disliked being asked things twice. Almost as much as, in this particular case, he disliked the appearance of the asker.

He paused long enough to let the stare become pointed; then he opened the door and stepped out on deck. He hated the stuffiness of the smoking-room, with its eternal cards and whisky pegs, and with an atmosphere so thick with tobacco smoke that at times he could hardly see across it.

Away to port, like a faint smudge on the horizon, lay the North Coast of Africa, and Hugh Massingham, with a faint smile, wondered just how many times he'd seen that smudge before. And how many times he'd see it in the future.

He leaned over the rail, staring at the water thoughtfully. It depended, of course, on Delia. Things are apt to depend on a man's wife. There was no necessity for him to go back to the East—no financial necessity—yet somehow he hoped Delia would like to come, at any rate, for a few years. England, from all he heard, didn't sound much of a place to live in just now, but, of course, she'd have to decide.

Surreptitiously he put a hand into his breast pocket and pulled out a photograph. It was the likeness of a woman—little more than a girl—with a pair of eyes that, even on the cardboard, mocked and haunted him. It was the likeness of a girl who was more than passing lovely; it was the likeness of his wife; a wife with whom he had spent his whole married life of one week. Involuntarily he smiled. A week together, out of four years. But if tactless Governments will conduct campaigns in Mesopotamia, some such result is hardly to be wondered at.

He drew in a deep breath, and once again started to stroll up and down the deck. He wondered if she'd find him much changed: a bit thinner, perhaps, but enteric tends to remove superfluous flesh. And what would she be like? Grown a little—no longer a lovely girl, but a lovely woman. The photograph was nearly five years old, and she had been nineteen then—no, nearly twenty. A week out of four years—a week!

With a faint smile still on his lips, he turned and re-entered the smoking-room. The persuasive gentleman, he noticed, had settled down to his game of poker with four youngsters, and for a moment Massingham frowned. He knew the type—knew it inside

out, and whoever might lose at that quiet game of poker there was one player who would certainly win. Not that he accused the persuasive gentleman for a moment of anything unfair; but he was of the type who had forgotten more about poker than the other four players combined were ever likely to know. With a slight shrug of his shoulders, he walked over to the bar and called for a gin and bitters. It was no business of his, and, from time immemorial, youth has had to pay for its experience.

It was about ten o'clock that night that it became increasingly evident that youth was paying with a vengeance. The persuasive gentleman had a very considerable proportion of the total number of chips beside him, to say nothing of a small library of written chits. And two of the other four players were looking worried, very worried. The thing was perfectly absurd; had they had not played poker pretty consistently in the mess? Made a bit of money out of it, too, taking it in the long run. But to-night the luck was simply infernal. Hugh Massingham smiled grimly to himself. Truly, the lambs had walked docilely to the slaughter.

For a while he watched the persuasive gentleman narrowly through half-closed eyes; then, because it was still no business of his, he moved towards the door for a final stroll on deck before turning in. And it was as he was on the point of opening it that one of the youngsters rose suddenly with a muttered curse.

"I can't play any more," he said, shortly. "I'm holding good cards, but they always seem to go down."

Hugh smiled once again; it isn't the man who holds bad cards who loses heavily at poker; it's the man who holds good ones when somebody else is holding a bit better. Then something in the boy's face made his hand drop to his side; quite evidently he had lost more than he could comfortably afford. And the persuasive gentleman's complacent smirk made Hugh annoyed. He disliked the persuasive gentleman.

"Have your revenge to-morrow night," he remarked, with a kind of oily suavity, and with a grunt the youngster drained his whisky and soda sullenly.

"Won't someone else take his place?" As if by accident the speaker's eyes met Hugh's, and it may have been due to the procession of whiskies, or it may have been due to the fact that the dislike was reciprocal, but the persuasive gentleman allowed himself the pleasure of a very faint sneer. "You, as you have told me twice, do not play, do you?"

It wasn't the words, but it was the way they were said that decided Massingham. The persuasive gentleman should have his lesson.

"I don't mind taking this gentleman's place for half an hour," he remarked, quietly. "What stakes are you playing?"

"Maximum five-pound rise, and limit of a hundred in the pool," returned the other, and Hugh's eyebrows went up. He called those small stakes, did he?

For a while the game went on normally without any hands of importance, and it was not until they had been playing about twenty minutes that the cards became interesting. And that hand they were very interesting! It was Hugh's deal, and he dealt, as

usual, slowly and methodically. The three youngsters threw their hands in at once; only the persuasive gentleman remained. And Hugh noted that the little finger of his left hand twitched slightly as he glanced at his cards.

"How many?" he demanded.

"One," said the other, and his voice was oily as ever.

"I stand," said Hugh, laying his cards face downwards on the table.

Then began the betting, and the youngster whose place he had taken watched eagerly in his excitement. They mounted a fiver at a time, until the persuasive gentleman reached the limit of a hundred.

"I'll see you at a hundred," drawled Hugh.

And a little gasp of envy ran round the spectators as the originator of the quiet game laid down four aces.

"You dealt 'em to me," he remarked with a smirk, his hand already stretched out to collar the pool.

"Er—one moment," murmured Hugh, and the persuasive gentleman turned white. Four aces. Only a straight flush could beat it. Surely——

Another gasp ran round the group. Hugh had just turned up his hand. And the three, four, five, six, and seven of clubs being a straight flush beats four aces.

For a moment Hugh allowed himself the luxury of watching the other's face. Then he spoke. "I certainly dealt you four aces, my friend; so I took the precaution of dealing myself a straight flush. And that is the reason why I do not play cards. Years of

boredom by myself on a plantation made me take up card-conjuring as a hobby. And I did this simple little trick to-night in order to demonstrate to you boys that even a fine card-player like the gentleman opposite may be quite helpless when playing with a stranger. In fact, I could win money off him just as easily as he can win money off you."

The persuasive gentleman appeared to be the least pleased member of the group, though the fact that after all he had not lost his money appeased him somewhat.

"Anyone, sir," he remarked, a little thickly, "can win money by cheating."

"Not anyone," said Hugh, amicably. "But we'll let that pass. Only I'd win money off you playing perfectly fair. You're not a good gambler; your finger twitches. Good-night."

And he was still smiling as he turned in.

II

With fingers that fumbled over the unaccustomed stiff shirt, Hugh Massingham was dressing for dinner. His first dinner with his wife for four years. It was the moment he had dreamed of through long, sweltering days in Mesopotamia—and now that it had come, he was afraid.

Things were different to what he had expected; Delia was different. He could hear her now, moving about in the next room, and her voice as she spoke to her maid. Somehow, he hadn't expected that maid. He had hoped—well, it didn't much matter what he'd

hoped. Anyway, it was absurd: naturally, his wife would have a maid.

It wasn't that that made him pause every now and again and stare a little blankly in front of him; it was something far bigger and more fundamental than such a triviality as a maid. And even to himself he would hardly acknowledge what it was. She was shy —naturally, any woman would be after such a long separation. And then the idea of associating shyness with his singularly self-possessed and lovely wife made him smile grimly. It was not that. No, it was simply—and Hugh Massingham took a deep breath like a man about to dive—it was simply that she had become a stranger to him. Or, to put it more accurately, he had become a stranger to her. The kiss which she had given him had been such as a sister would give to her brother. True, there had not been much time—some people had arrived to play bridge and had remained most of the afternoon. Delia wouldn't hear of their going away, though they had half suggested it. And he had spent the afternoon at his club—the afternoon of which he'd dreamed through four long weary years. A stranger—he was a stranger in his own house. With a twisted apology for a smile, he put on his coat and switched out the light. Time doubtless would straighten out the situation; but there had been enough time already in their married life. There had been four years.

Dinner, perfectly served and faultlessly cooked, merely continued the hollow mockery of his homecoming. He felt that he might have been dining with any pretty woman at any house; not with his wife in

his own. In fact, except that he happened to pay for it, it wasn't his house. Everything about it was hers —except himself. He was merely the stranger within his own gates.

"A little different, Delia, to what I had imagined it," he remarked, quietly, as the servant, having placed the port in front of him, left the room.

For a moment she looked at him narrowly; then she leaned back in her chair.

"In what way?" she asked, calmly. "Don't you think the flat is comfortable?"

They had got to have a straight talk anyway; perhaps it was as well, she reflected, to get it over and done with. There was no good starting on false pretences.

"Very." He rose and stood by the fireplace looking down at her. "It wasn't the flat I was alluding to." With ostentatious deliberation he selected a cigarette and lit it. "Do you know it's four years since we've seen one another?"

"Quite strangers, aren't we?" she agreed, lightly.

"Exactly—the very word. Strangers. But through no wish of mine."

"Nor mine, either, my dear man. It's simply the inevitable result of four years' separation."

"I disagree; the result is by no manner of means inevitable. However, I won't press the point. But was it absolutely essential that those people should have stopped to bridge this afternoon? They had the decency to suggest going."

It was not a happy way of putting it, and a red spot burned for a moment on his wife's cheek.

"And I had not the decency to let them, you imply." She laughed a little shortly. "Well, since you've started this conversation, I suppose we may as well have it out."

Hugh's hand clenched suddenly behind his back, and he stood very still. A little dully, he wondered what was coming.

"I can only hope that you will be sensible and try and look at the matter from all points of view." She, too, lit a cigarette, and stared at him deliberately. "In the first place, I suppose I've changed—considerably. And in order to save any misunderstanding, it's just as well that we should both know where we stand."

"You mean you don't love me any more?" said her husband, slowly.

"Don't be ridiculous," she cried. "I never said anything of the sort. I'm very fond of you. But—" she stirred a little restlessly in her chair. "I've never believed, as you know, in beating about the bush, and there is another man whom I'm very fond of, too."

The dull, sickening blow, which well-nigh stunned him mentally, showed not at all on Hugh Massingham's face.

"One can't help these things," continued his wife, gravely, "and I think you'll agree that it is best for everybody to discuss matters as they are—rather than go on living as if they were otherwise."

"Quite," he murmured, grimly. "Please go on."

"We need neither of us insult our intelligences by regarding the matter in the light that our fathers and mothers would have looked at it. The fact that a married woman falls in love with a man who is not

her husband is not a thing to hold up hands of pious horror at—or so it seems to me; it is just a thing which has happened, and if one is sensible, the best course is to see the most satisfactory way out for all concerned. Don't you agree?"

"Your argument certainly has its points," concurred Hugh. Great heavens! was this conversation real, or was he dreaming?

"Jimmy Staunton has kissed me—but that's all."

His wife was speaking again, and he listened dully.

"Jimmy Staunton! Is that the man's name?"

He threw his cigarette, long gone out, into the grate.

"Yes—that is the man. He's been asking me for months to go away with him, but I've refused. I didn't tell him why, but I'm going to tell you now. I wouldn't go until you'd come home, and I'd seen you again, and made sure—that——" She hesitated, and the man laughed grimly.

"Made sure that you really did love Mr. Jimmy Staunton more than me! Dreadful thing to make a second mistake."

"Put it that way, if you like," she answered, quietly. "Though it wasn't from quite such baldly selfish motives that I refused to go with him. I tried, Hugh, to argue the thing out as best I could; I tried to be fair to him and to you. I realised that I might be wrong—that I didn't really love him—" the man by the fireplace made a quick, convulsive movement, "and anyway I realised that I must give you a chance if you want to have it. If, after what I've told you, you decide to let me go—well and good; we can arrange details easily. If, on the other hand, you refuse,

and in the course of a month, say, I find that I was not mistaken, and that I'm fonder of Jimmy than I am of you, well, I shall have to take the law into my own hands."

Hugh Massingham laughed shortly.

"I see," he answered. "You have put things very clearly." He turned on her with an expressionless face. "I take it, then, that as matters stand at present, I am on trial."

"If you wish," she said. "I realise that you have a perfect right to refuse that trial, and tell me to go; but, after all your goodness to me, I could not do less than offer it to you."

"Your generosity touches me," he remarked, grimly. "And——"

It was at that moment that the servant opened the door and announced: "Mr. Staunton."

"Are you coming to Hector's, Delia?"

An immaculately clad young man entered, with his evening overcoat on his arm and a top-hat in his hand, to stop in momentary confusion on seeing Hugh.

"I beg your pardon," he muttered. "I—er——"

"This is my husband, Jimmy," said Delia, composedly, and the two men bowed.

"My wife was just talking about you, Mr. Staunton," said Hugh, impassively, while he took in every detail of the other's face—the mouth, well-formed, but inclined to weakness; the eyes that failed to meet his own; the hands, beautifully manicured, which twitched uneasily as they played with his white scarf.

Good God! This effeminate clothes-peg! To be on

trial against—this! He stifled a contemptuous laugh; there was Delia to be considered.

"Pray don't let me detain you from Hector's; though I'm not quite certain what it is."

"A night-club, Mr. Massingham," said the other, nervously. "But perhaps Mrs. Massingham would prefer not to go this evening?"

"I am convinced my wife would prefer nothing of the sort," returned Hugh, and for a moment his eyes and Delia's met. Then with a faint shrug she stood up. "Four years in Mesopotamia do not improve one's dancing." He strolled to the door. "I shall wander round to the club, my dear," he murmured. "And, by the way, with regard to your offer, I accept it."

"Good Lord, darling!" whispered Staunton, as the door closed. "I'd got no idea he'd come back. What an awful break!"

But she was staring at the door, and seemed not to hear his remark. It was only as he kissed her that she came back to the reality of his presence.

"Let's go and dance, Jimmy," she said, feverishly. "I feel like dancing—to-night."

III

"Halloa, Hugh! Got back, have you?"

The words greeted Massingham as he strolled through the club smoking-room in search of a seat, and with a start he looked at the speaker. So engrossed had he been in his own thoughts that he had failed to

notice his brother-in-law, John Ferrers, till he was right on top of him.

"Yes, John—back," he said, slowly. "Back to-day—after four years."

Ferrers grunted and leaned over to pull up a chair. Something wrong—quite obviously. A man doesn't come to his club on the first evening home after four years, under normal circumstances.

"Have a drink!" Ferrers beckoned a waiter and gave the order. "How do you think Delia is looking?"

"Very well," said Hugh, quietly. "Very well indeed. She has gone off to a place called Hector's to-night."

Ferrers paused in the act of lighting his pipe, and looked at him in mild amazement. "Delia gone to Hector's to-night! What the devil has she done that for?"

"A gentleman of the name of Staunton—Jimmy Staunton—arrived in his glad rags after dinner," remarked Hugh. "She went to Hector's with him—I came here."

"Young Staunton!" muttered Ferrers. "I didn't know——" He looked quickly at Hugh; then he resumed lighting his pipe. "If I were you, Hugh—of course I know it's not my business—but if I were you I wouldn't let Delia go about too much with young Staunton. He's a—well, he's a useless young puppy to begin with, and his reputation is nothing to write home about in addition."

"Ah! is that so?" Hugh lay back in his chair and stared at his brother-in-law. "I had already classed

him as a puppy; but I didn't think he was big enough to have a reputation of any kind—good or bad."

"My dear fellow—he's young, he's good-looking, and he's sufficiently well off to be able to do nothing. Also I believe he dances perfectly. Whether it's those assets, or whether it's something which the vulgar masculine eye is unable to appreciate, I can't tell you. But I do know this: that three ordinary, decent, sensible young married women of my acquaintance have made the most infernal fools of themselves over that youth." John Ferrers shook his head. "I'm hanged if I know what it is. It must be the war or something. But a lot of these girls seem to have gone completely off the rails."

He sighed ponderously; he was a good-hearted individual, was John Ferrers, but anything which deviated from his idea of the normal generally called forth a mild outburst. Also, he was very fond of his sister.

And really it wasn't quite the thing to go barging off to a night-club the day your husband returned after four years. Especially with young Staunton. It came back to his mind now, as he sat there pulling at his pipe, that off and on he had seen her about with the fellow; in the park, and twice at a theatre. Also having supper once at the Ritz, and two or three times at dinner. Of course there was nothing in it, but—still—confound it! the first night after four years.

"Are you going to take Delia out East with you, old boy?"

"That depends, John, on a variety of circumstances," remarked Hugh, quietly.

"I would if I were you," grunted the other. "It's been lonely for her, you know, and——" He became very interested in his pipe. "I wouldn't take too much notice of that young ass. Delia is far too sensible a girl to make a fool of herself over any man—let alone Staunton. But," and John Ferrers drained his glass decisively, "the next time I see her, I shall tell her a few home truths."

"Oh, no, John!" said Hugh, "you won't. I don't want you to allude to the matter at all. But I want you to tell me one thing. In those three cases you mentioned, did any question of divorce come up?"

"Divorce!" John Ferrers sat up in his chair abruptly. "What the deuce are you talking about?"

"The three cases you were speaking of," returned Hugh, imperturbably. "What manner of man is this Staunton, if things pass the dallying stage and come to a head?"

"Oh!" His brother-in-law sat back, relieved. "I can't tell you more than that Mr. James Staunton does not strike me as the type who would ever face the music. While he can take his pleasure with other men's wives, I don't think he has any intention of providing himself with one of his own."

"That was my diagnosis of his character," said Hugh. "I'm glad you confirm it."

John Ferrers rose as another member came up.

"Will you join us, Hugh? Snooker."

"No, thanks, old boy. Not to-night. So long."

With a faint smile he watched his worthy brother-in-law as he crossed the room. Then, having ordered another drink, he lay back in his chair and closed his

eyes. And it was not till an hour later that he rose and wrote a short letter to a certain firm of shipping agents. Then he left the club, with the look on his face of a man who had made up his mind.

IV

It was Hugh himself who opened the door of the flat at two o'clock in the morning and let in his wife. Staunton was standing behind her on the landing, and Hugh nodded to him.

"Had a good time?" he asked, genially, standing aside to let Delia in. "Come in, Mr. Staunton, and have a nightcap before you go. No? Really, I insist."

Gently but firmly he propelled his reluctant guest towards the dining-room. The last thing which Mr. James Staunton wanted was a drink in his present surroundings. In fact, Mr. James Staunton wanted more than words can express to retire to his lonely bachelor couch, where he could meditate at leisure on how best to extricate himself from a situation which had suddenly ceased to appeal to his somewhat peculiar sense of humour. Really, he had credited Delia with a little more knowledge of the rules of the game. For months he'd been suggesting that there were possibilities by the sad sea waves at a delightful little fishing village down in Cornwall; or if that was too far afield he knew of a charming little hotel on the upper reaches of the Thames. In fact, the whole of his vast experience in such matters would have been at her disposal, and for no rhyme or reason, so far as

he could see, she had continually refused his suggestion. And he was not used to being refused. Up to a point, of course, a little coyness and hesitation was delightful; but pushed to an extreme it became tedious. And then, to cap everything, on the very night when this large and somewhat uncouth-looking husband had returned from the back of beyond, Delia had become serious.

Hector's had not been a success; though he had manfully tried to be his own bright self. But there had been long silences—rather awkward silences—when he had been conscious that Delia was studying him—almost as if he was a stranger to her. And since he had an uneasy suspicion that he had not altogether shone during his meeting with her husband, he had found things increasingly difficult as the evening wore on.

"Say when, Mr. Staunton," Massingham was pouring some whisky into a glass, and he stepped up to the table.

"That's enough, thanks. Yes, soda, please. And then I must be off."

"The night is yet young," said his host, "and I rather want to have a talk with you, Mr. Staunton."

The youngster looked up quickly at the words; then he glanced at Delia, who was staring at her husband with a slight frown.

"Rather late, isn't it?" he murmured.

Massingham smiled genially. "Two—late! You surprise me, Mr. Staunton. I thought that was about the time some of you people started to live." He splashed some soda into his own glass. "It's about

my wife—about Delia. Absurd to call her anything but Delia to you, isn't it? I mean, we three need not stand on formality."

Staunton stiffened slightly; then, because he was painfully aware that his hands were beginning to tremble, he put them in his pockets.

"Really, Mr. Massingham," he laughed slightly, "you're very kind." Surely to Heaven she hadn't told her husband—anything.

"Not at all," returned Hugh. "Not at all, my dear fellow. It is absurd—as you said yourself, my dear, earlier in the evening—for us to become in any way agitated or annoyed over an unfortunate but very natural occurrence. And I consider it very natural, Staunton, that you should have fallen in love with my wife. I regard it in many respects as a compliment to myself."

His eyes were fixed steadily on the other's face, and a wave of contemptuous disgust surged up in him, though outwardly he gave no sign. The pitiful indecision of this king of lady-killers: the weak mouth, loose and twitching—surely Delia could see for herself what manner of thing it was. But his wife was sitting motionless, staring in front of her, and gave no sign.

"I—er, really," stammered Staunton.

"Don't apologise, my dear fellow—don't apologise. As I said, it's a most natural thing, and though this discussion may seem at first sight a trifle bizarre, yet if you think it over it's much the best manner of dealing with the situation."

"Er—quite."

Staunton shifted uneasily on his feet, and endeavoured feverishly to regain his self-control. Of course, the whole thing was farcical and Gilbertian; at the same time, just at the moment it appeared remarkably real. And he couldn't make up his mind how to take this large, imperturbable man.

"I told my husband, Jimmy," said Delia, speaking for the first time, "that we were in love with one another—and that you'd asked me to go away with you."

With intense amusement Hugh watched Staunton's jaw drop, though his wife, still staring in front of her, noticed nothing.

"Most kind of you," remarked Hugh, affably, and Delia looked at him quickly. "Most flattering. But my wife apparently decided that it wouldn't be quite fair to me—so she waited till I came home. And now I'm on trial—so to speak."

Staunton sat down in a chair; his legs felt strangely weak.

"The trouble is," continued Hugh, "that circumstances have arisen only to-night which prevent me standing on trial. I found a letter waiting for me at my club which necessitates my return to the East at once—probably for a year."

"By Jove—really!" Staunton sat up; the situation looked a little brighter.

"Going East at once?" Delia was staring at him, puzzled.

"I'm afraid I must," returned her husband. "And so it makes things a little awkward, doesn't it? You see, Mr. Staunton, my wife's proposal was this: If after a few weeks of my presence she still found that

she preferred you to me, she was going to tell me so straight out. Then—since, as I think you will agree, a woman must always be a man's first consideration—I would have effaced myself, gone through the necessary formalities to allow her to divorce me, and left her free to marry you. If, on the other hand, she had found that after all she could not return your devotion—well, we should then have gone on as we are. Perhaps not exactly the Church's idea of morality—but for all that, very fair. Don't you agree?"

Staunton nodded; speech was beyond his power.

"Now," continued Hugh, lighting a cigarette, "this sudden necessity for me to go East has upset her plan. I can't wait for those few weeks of test, and so we are confronted with a difficulty. I feel that it is not fair to keep her from you for a year or possibly longer; on the other hand, I feel that it is rather hard luck on me to relinquish her without a struggle. You said, Mr. Staunton? Sorry; I thought you spoke." He flicked the ash off his cigarette, and, crossing the room, he opened a bureau on the other side. "And so I've evolved a plan," he remarked, coming back again with a pack of cards in his hand. "A time-honoured method of settling things where there are two alternatives, and one which I suggest can be used with advantage here. We will each cut a card, Mr. Staunton. If I win, Delia comes East with me—on the clear understanding, my dear, that you may leave me at any moment and return to Mr. Staunton. I wouldn't like you to think for an instant that I am proposing to deprive you of your absolute free will whichever way the cards go. If I lose, on the other hand, I go East alone, and

the necessary information to enable you to institute divorce proceedings will be sent you as soon as possible."

His wife rose quickly, and stood in front of him. "I'll come East with you, Hugh—anyway, for a time. It's only fair."

"Quite," agreed Staunton. "It's only fair."

"Not at all," remarked Massingham, decidedly. "I wouldn't dream of accepting such a sacrifice. It's a totally different matter if I win it at cards: then I shall hold you to it. Otherwise I go East alone. I have, I think, a certain say in the matter, and my mind is made up."

He turned to Staunton, who was staring at him open-mouthed; then he glanced at Delia, and she, for the first time, was looking at Jimmy Staunton.

"I suppose," he remarked, suddenly, "that I'm not making any mistake? You do wish to marry Delia, don't you, Mr. Staunton?"

For a moment that gentleman seemed to find difficulty in speaking. Then—"Of course," he muttered. "Of course."

"Good!" said Massingham. "Then we'll cut. Ace low—low wins."

He put the pack on a small table by the other man: then he turned away.

"Cut—please."

"But, Hugh," his wife laid her hand on his arm, "it's impossible—it's——"

"Not at all, Delia. It's all quite simple. Have you cut?"

"I've cut the King of Hearts." Staunton was

standing up. "So it looks as if I lose." His voice seemed hardly to indicate that the blow had prostrated him.

Massingham turned round, while his wife's breath came sharply.

"It does—undoubtedly," he remarked. "Yes—mine's the two of clubs. So you come, Delia." He broke off abruptly, his eyes fixed on the chair in which Staunton had been sitting. The next moment he stepped forward and pulled a card from the crack between the seat and the side. "The ace of diamonds," he said, slowly. "What is this card doing here? I don't quite understand, Mr. Staunton. Ace low—low wins—and the ace of diamonds in your chair. I didn't watch you cut—but did you not want to win?"

"I—I—don't know how it got there," stammered Staunton, foolishly. "I didn't put it there."

"Then one rather wonders who did," said Massingham, coldly. "It makes things a little difficult."

For a moment or two there was silence: then Delia spoke.

"On the contrary," she remarked, icily, "it seems to me to make them very easy. Good-night, Mr. Staunton. I shall not be at home to you in future."

And when Hugh Massingham returned a few minutes later, having shown the speechless and semi-dazed Staunton the front door, his wife had gone to her room.

"Undoubtedly one rather wonders who did," he murmured to himself with a faint smile. "But I think—I think, it was a good idea."

V

"It was a sort of infatuation, Hugh. I can't explain it." With her arm through his—she hadn't quite found her sea-legs yet—they were walking slowly up and down the promenade deck of the liner.

He smiled gently.

"Doesn't need any explanation, darling," he answered. "It's happened before; it will happen again. There are quite a number of Mr. James Stauntons at large—more's the pity."

"I know," she said. "I know that. But somehow he seemed different."

"HE always does." For a while they continued their walk in silence. "Quite cured, little girl?"

"Quite, absolutely." She squeezed his arm. "I think I was well on the way to being cured, before—before he cheated. And that finished it."

"Ah!" Hugh stopped a moment to light a cigarette.

"It simply defeats me how, after all he said, he could have done such a thing."

"I wouldn't let it worry you, sweetheart. The matter is of little importance. Halloa! What do these people want?"

"Glad to see you about again, Mrs. Massingham." An officer in the Indian Army, returning from leave, and his wife came up. "Would you and your husband care to make up a four at bridge?"

"Would you, dear?" She turned to him, and Massingham smiled.

"You go, Delia. You'll be able to find a fourth,

and you've walked enough. I never play cards, myself."

"What a refreshing individual," laughed the officer's wife. "Does it bore you?"

"Intensely," murmured Hugh. "And I'm such a bad player."

He watched his wife go away with them: then, leaning over the rail, he commenced to fill his pipe. Away to starboard, like a faint smudge on the horizon, lay the north coast of Africa: two days in front was Malta. And then—— Surreptitiously he put a hand into his breast pocket and pulled out a photograph. Yes: it had been a good idea.

V

A QUESTION OF PERSONALITY

I

THE personally conducted tour round Frenton's Steel Works paused, as usual, on reaching the show piece of the entertainment. The mighty hammer, operated with such consummate ease by the movement of a single lever, though smaller than its more celebrated brother at Woolwich Arsenal, never failed to get a round of applause from the fascinated onlookers. There was something almost frightening about the deadly precision with which it worked, and the uncanny accuracy of the man who controlled it. This time it would crash downwards delivering a blow which shook the ground: next time it would repeat the performance, only to stop just as the spectators were bracing themselves for the shock—stop with such mathematical exactitude that the glass of a watch beneath it would be cracked but the works would not be damaged.

For years now, personally conducted tours had come round Frenton's works. Old Frenton was always delighted when his friends asked him if they might take their house-parties round: he regarded it as a compliment to himself. For he had made the works, watched them grow and expand till now they were known

throughout the civilised world. They were just part of him, the fruit of his brain—born of labour and hard work and nurtured on the hard-headed business capacity of the rugged old Yorkshireman. He was a millionaire now, many times over, but he could still recall the day when sixpence extra a day had meant the difference between chronic penury and affluence. And in those far-off days there had come a second resolve into his mind to keep the first and ever-present one company. That first one had been with him ever since he could remember anything—the resolve to succeed; the second one became no less deep rooted. When he did succeed he'd pay his men such wages that there would never be any question of sixpence a day making a difference. The labourer was worthy of his hire: out of the sweat of his own brow John Frenton had evolved that philosophy for himself. . . .

And right loyally he had stuck to it. When success came, and with it more and more, till waking one morning he realised that the *big* jump had been taken, and that henceforth Frenton's would be one of the powers in the steel world, he did not forget. He paid his men well—almost lavishly: all he asked was that they should work in a similar spirit. And he did more. From the memories of twenty years before he recalled the difference between the two partners for whom he had then been working. One of them had never been seen in the works save as an aloof being from another world, regarding his automatons with an uninterested but searching eye: the other had known every one of his men by name, and had treated them as his own personal friends. And yet his eye was just as searching.

. . . But—what a difference: what an enormous difference!

And so John Frenton had learned and profited by the example which stared him in the face: things might perhaps be different to-day if more employers had learned that lesson too. To him every man he employed was a personal friend: again all he asked was that they should regard him likewise. . . .

"Boys," he had said to them on one occasion, when a spirit of unrest had been abroad in the neighbouring works, "if you've got any grievance, there's only one thing I ask. Come and get it off your chests to me: don't get muttering and grousing about it in corners. If I can remedy it, I will: if I can't I'll tell you why. Anyway, a talk will clear the air. . . ."

In such manner had John Frenton run his works: in such manner had he become a millionaire and found happiness as well. And then had come the great grief of his life. His wife had died when Marjorie, the only child, was born. Twenty years ago the sweet kindly woman who had cheered him through the burden and heat of the day had died in giving him Marjorie. They had been married eight years, and when she knew that their hopes were going to be realised, it seemed as if nothing more could be wanting to complete their happiness. The stormy times were over: success had come. And now . . . a child.

When the doctor told John Frenton he went mad. He cursed Fate: he cursed the wretched brat that had come and taken away his woman. For weeks he refused to see it: and then Time, the Great Healer, dulled the agony. Instead of a wife—a daughter: and

on the girl he lavished all the great wealth of love of which his rugged nature was capable. He idolised her: and she, because her nature was sweet, remained a charming, unaffected girl. Some day she would be fabulously rich, but the fact did not concern her greatly. In fact she barely thought of it: it would be many long days before her dearly loved dad left her. And so it had been up to a year ago. . . . Then she'd met the man.

It would perhaps be more correct to say that the man had met her. The Honourable Herbert Strongley received an intimation from an aunt of his, that if he would find it convenient to abstain for a while from his normal method of living, and come and stay with her in the country, she would introduce him to a charming girl staying at a neighbouring house. She specified who the charming girl was, and suggested that though from his birth Herbert had been a fool, he couldn't be such a damned fool as to let this slip. She was an outspoken lady was this aunt. . . .

The Honourable Herbert made a few inquiries, and left London next day for a protracted stay with his relative. It took him a week—he possessed a very charming manner did Herbert—before he was formally engaged to Marjorie. The armament of nineteen has but little resisting power when exposed to the batteries of a good-looking, delightful man of the world who is really bringing all his guns to bear. And because the man was a consummate actor when he chose to be, he had but little more difficulty in getting through the defences of her father. Marjorie seemed wonderfully happy: that was the chief thing to John Fren-

ton. And he was getting old: carrying out his usual routine at the works was daily becoming more and more of a strain. Why not? He had no son—everything would go to his girl and her husband at his death. His life work would be in their hands. . . . If he'd had his way, perhaps, he'd have chosen someone with a little more knowledge of the trade—the Honourable Herbert didn't know the difference between mild and tool steel: but after all a happy marriage did not depend on such technical qualifications. As a man he seemed all that could be desired, and that was the principal thing that mattered. He could trust his managers for the rest. . . .

And so his prospective son-in-law became a prospective partner. Ostensibly he was supposed to be picking up the tricks of the trade, a performance which afforded him no pleasure whatever. He loathed work in any form: he regarded it as a form of partial insanity—almost a disease. During the hours which he spent in the office his reason—such as it was—was only saved by the help of *Ruff's Guide* and telephonic communication with his bookmaker. . . . But he was far too astute a person to run any risks. He was playing for immeasurably larger stakes than he could afford to lose, and in addition he was quite genuinely fond of Marjorie in his own peculiar way. He intended to marry her, and then, when the old man was dead—and he was visibly failing—the Honourable Herbert had his own ideas on the subject of Frenton's Steel Works. The only trouble was that Frenton's Steel Works had their own ideas on the subject of the Honourable Herbert, though that gentleman was supremely ignorant of

the fact. Without a slip he had acted his part before John Frenton: with just the right eagerness to learn he had played up to the managers: but—and it was a big but—he had forgotten the men. They had never even entered into his calculations, and it would doubtless have amazed him to hear that he had entered very considerably into theirs. For the men did not like the Honourable Herbert—in fact they disliked him considerably: and since there was no secret regarding his future—a future which concerned them intimately—this error in the calculations was serious. They were a rough-and-ready crowd, with rough-and-ready ideas of justice and fair play. In addition they idolised Marjorie Frenton and her father to a man. It had taken them about a month to size up the new partner, and that was six months ago. Since then, slowly and inexorably—their brains did not work very quickly—the determination that they would *not* have the Honourable Herbert as John Frenton's successor had crystallised and hardened. For a while they had waited: surely the old man would see for himself that the man was useless. But the old man did not see: the Honourable Herbert still strolled yawning through the works, taking not the slightest notice of any of the hands—the man whom they in future would have to work for. Very good: if old John could not see it for himself, other steps would have to be taken to dispose of the gentleman.

They might have been peaceful steps but for an incident which had occurred the day before the personally conducted tour already mentioned. It was conducted by the Honourable Herbert himself, and consisted of

the house-party staying with John Frenton and Marjorie. The house-party noticed nothing unusual, somewhat naturally: they were bored or interested according to their natures. But as the tour progressed, a look of puzzled wonder began to dawn in Marjorie's eyes. What on earth was the matter with the men?

It was some time since she had been in the works, and the change was the more pronounced because of it. Instead of cheery smiles, sullen faces and black looks followed them wherever they went: she sensed that the whole atmosphere of the place was hostile. And after a while the uneasy suspicion began to form in her mind that the object of this hostility was her fiancé. She took advantage of the halt at the steam hammer to draw him on one side.

"What on earth is the matter with the men, Herbert?" she demanded. "I've never seen them like this before."

The Honourable Herbert cursed under his breath. He, too, had been painfully aware of the scowls which had followed them, though he had hoped against hope that Marjorie would not notice. Moreover, he had known only too well the reason of the demonstration. And now it would come to old John's ears. . . . He cursed again, as the girl looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Lord knows, my dear," he answered, abruptly. "I suppose the blighters have got some fancied grievance."

"'Blighters! Fancied grievance!'" The girl stepped back a pace in genuine amazement. "Then why don't you have them together and ask them, like daddy used to do?"

As she spoke she glanced over his shoulder, and for a moment her eyes met those of a man standing behind him. He was looking at her deliberately and intently, and suddenly, to her surprise, he held up a twisted slip of paper in his hand. Then he pointed to the floor and turned away. It had been done so quickly that for a while she could hardly believe her eyes. One of the men, trying to pass a secret note. . . . To her. . . . What on earth *was* the matter with everybody? . . .

Once again the man looked at her with the suspicion of a smile on his face, and she frowned quickly. He was impertinent, this youngster, and she turned to her fiancé. She remembered now that the last time she had been round she had seen him working on a lathe: that it had struck her then that he had seemed different from the others—his hands, oily though they were: the cool, unembarrassed look in his eyes: his way of speaking. . . . Almost as if he had been her equal. . . . And now he was presuming on her kindness then. . . .

Her hands clenched involuntarily as she looked at her fiancé.

"What is the name of that man with his back half towards us, over there?" she demanded. For the moment the "fancied grievance" was forgotten in more personal matters.

The Honourable Herbert, thankful for the respite, swung round. Then as he saw the subject of her question his jaw set in an ugly line.

"John Morrison," he answered, shortly. "And if I had my way I'd sack him on the spot. A useless, argumentative, insubordinate swine. . . ."

And it was as this graceful eulogy concluded that

John Morrison looked at her again. Her fiancé had moved away, and she was standing alone. For a moment she hesitated: then she, too, turned to join the rest of the party. And lying on the ground where she had been, was her handkerchief. . . .

It was done on the spur of the moment—a feminine impulse. And the instant she had done it, she regretted it. But there had been something in her fiancé's voice as he spoke that had come as a shock to her: something ugly and vicious; something new as far as she was concerned. Though what that had to do with John Morrison passing her a note was obscure.

"You dropped your handkerchief, Miss Frenton." A courteous, well-bred voice was speaking close behind her, and she turned slowly to find John Morrison holding it out to her.

"Thank you," she answered. Rolled up inside it she could feel the twisted wisp of paper, and as the Honourable Herbert came up with an angry look on his face she hesitated.

"What do you want?" he snapped at the man.

"Miss Frenton dropped her handkerchief, sir," answered Morrison, impassively.

The other grunted.

"All right. Get on with your work."

Marjorie hesitated no longer. With a sort of blinding certainty there flashed into her mind the conviction that something was wrong. She didn't stop to analyse her thoughts: she merely felt convinced that John Morrison was not an insubordinate swine, and that in the note she held in her hand lay the clue to a great deal that was puzzling her at the moment. And so with a

gracious smile at the man she slipped her handkerchief into her bag. . . .

It was ten minutes before she found an opportunity of reading the note. It was in pencil, and the handwriting was small and neat.

"It is immaterial to me what action you take on receiving this," it ran. "But if you are in any way interested in your fiancé's future, I most strongly advise you to suggest a change of air to him. Of his capabilities as a husband you must decide for yourself: of his capabilities as the boss of Frenton's, other people have already decided, as possibly you may have noticed this morning. So get him away, and *keep him away.* You haven't got much time."

"Get him away, and keep him away." The words danced before the girl's eyes. She was conscious of no anger against John Morrison: merely of a stunned surprise. The thing was so totally unexpected. "Of his capabilities as the boss of Frenton's, other people have already decided." And even as she read and re-read the sentence, she found that she was actually asking herself the question—"Was it so totally unexpected after all?" That matters should have come to a head in such an abrupt way was a staggering shock: but . . . She crumpled the note into her bag once more, and walked slowly towards the waiting cars. A hundred little half-defined thoughts came crowding in on her memory: a hundred little things which had not struck her at the time—or was it that she hadn't allowed them to strike her?—now arrayed themselves in massed formation in front of her.

She paused with her foot on the step of the car. The

Honourable Herbert was solicitously bending over a stout and boring aunt of hers, and she watched him dispassionately. "Of his capabilities as a husband you must decide for yourself." Impertinent. . . . And yet she was not conscious of any resentment.

"Come up to lunch, Herbert," she said, as he stepped over to her. "I want to talk to you afterwards."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"I shall be very busy this afternoon, dear."

"I think the works will stand your absence for one afternoon," she remarked, quietly, and he bit his lip.

"I'll be there, Marjorie." He fumbled with her rug. "One o'clock sharp, I suppose."

He stood back, and the cars rolled off.

"What a charming man your fiancé is, my dear!" cooed the elderly female sitting beside Marjorie. "So polite: so . . . so . . . impressive."

The girl smiled a little absently, and nodded. "Impressive. . . ." It struck her that the word exactly described Herbert. He was impressive. And then, because she was loyal clean through, she started to fan herself into a furious rage at the abominable impertinence of this wretched man, John Morrison. Herbert was right: he was an insubordinate swine. . . . How dare he—how *dare he*—hand her such a note! He ought to be sacked at once. She would tell Herbert about it after lunch, and he would explain matters. Of course he would explain—of course. . . .

John Frenton was standing on the steps as the cars drove up, and impulsively she went up to him.

"Herbert is coming to lunch, daddy," she cried, putting her arm through his.

"Is he, darling," said the old man, patting her hand. "That's all right." He turned to the rest of the party as they came up. "Well—what do you think of my works? None in England to beat 'em, my friends, not if you search from John o' Groats to Land's End. And as for a strike, it's unknown, sir, unknown. . . . My men don't do it, whatever other firms may do."

He passed into the house, talking animatedly to one of his guests, and for a while Marjorie stood, staring over the three miles of open country to where the high chimneys of Frenton's Steel Works stuck up like slender sticks against the dull background of smoke. Then with a little sigh she, too, went up the steps into the house.

II

"Herbert, I don't quite understand about this morning." She was in her own sitting-room, and her fiancé, standing in front of the fire, was lighting a cigarette. "What is the matter at the works?"

All through lunch the Honourable Herbert, in the intervals of being charming to the ghastly collection of old bores—as he mentally dubbed them—who formed the party, had been puzzling out the best line to take at this interview. That the girl had seen that something was wrong was obvious: no one but a blind person could have failed to notice it. And now that the interview had actually started he was still undecided. . . .

"My dear little girl," he remarked, gently, sitting down beside her and taking her hand. . . . "Why worry about it? As I told you this morning, some lit-

the grievance, I expect—which I'll inquire into. . . ."

The girl shook her head.

"It's something very much more than a grievance," she said, quietly but positively. "There's something radically wrong, Herbert. I want to know what it is."

"Good heavens! Marjorie"—there was a hint of impatience in his voice—"haven't I told you I'll inquire into it? Do be reasonable, my dear girl."

"I'm being perfectly reasonable," she answered, still in the same quiet tone. "But I don't understand how things have got as far as they have without any steps on your part. You say you don't know what's the matter. Daddy would have known long ago—and remedied it." The Honourable Herbert's opinion of daddy, at that moment, remained unspoken. . . . "You see," went on the girl, "they're just part of daddy, are the works. He was only saying to-day that he had never had any strikes. And now, when he's getting old. . . ." She stirred restlessly in her chair, and looked at the fire. "Of his capabilities as the boss of Frenton's, other people have already decided." The words danced before her in the flames, and almost passionately she turned to the man beside her. "Don't you see," she cried, "don't you realise that I feel responsible? You're there—as a partner—because you're my fiancé. That's the only reason. The works will come to me when daddy dies: I shall be responsible for them —I and my husband. . . ."

"You could always turn the thing into a Limited Company, darling," murmured the man, "if you found it too great a strain." He waited for an answer, but none came, and after a while he continued in an easy,

reassuring voice. "Of course, I understand, my little Marjorie, your feelings on the matter."

"Do you?" she interrupted, slowly. "I wonder."

"I'm only a beginner," he went on, and his voice was a trifle hurt. "One can't pick up all sorts of technical knowledge in a month, or even a year. . . ."

"Technical knowledge isn't wanted, Herbert—so much as human knowledge, personality. I could run those works—with the help of Mr. Thompson and the other managers. . . . Ah, dear!" she bent forward quickly. "I don't want to hurt you. But I just can't imagine what would have happened if dad had gone round the works with us this morning. . . . I believe it would have almost killed him. . . ."

"Very well, dear, if those are your feelings there is no more to be said." With quiet dignity her fiancé rose to his feet. "If you are not satisfied with me . . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"I am," she cried, quickly. "I am, Herbert—perfectly satisfied. But . . ."

"Then don't think any more about it," he said, quickly. "I'll go down, little girl, and find out what the trouble is. And then I'll put it right, and let you know. . . ."

"You'll let me know this evening, won't you?"

For a moment he hesitated.

"If possible, Marjorie. . . ."

"But of course it's possible," she cried, impulsively. "At *our* works, you've only got to ask. . . . Have the men together and ask. . . ."

The Honourable Herbert's face was expressionless, as he bent over and kissed her.

"Quite so, darling," he murmured. "Quite so. Don't worry about it any more. . . ."

And it was not until he was at the wheel of his car driving back to his office that he gave vent to his real feelings. "Ask the men?" He saw himself doing it. The cursed luck of the thing. But for that one episode yesterday, he could have bluffed it through, until they were married at any rate. After that he had never had any intention of carrying on a deception which bored him to extinction: there would be no need to. . . . But now. . . . The marvel to him was that they hadn't struck already. And once they did, and John Frenton came down to the works and the cause became known—good-bye to his hopes of the future. Marjorie would never forgive him. And as the realisation of what that would entail struck him seriously for the first time, he swore savagely. He had been banking on the Frenton millions not only morally but actually. And if they failed to materialise. . . . Once again he cursed under his breath. . . .

It was after dinner that night that Marjorie made up her mind. She had twice rung up her fiancé with no result. The first time he had not come in: the second he had just gone out—to the local theatre, the servant believed. With a frown she hung up the receiver, and turning away walked slowly to her father's study.

"I want to see the book of addresses, daddy," she said, quietly.

It was one of old Frenton's hobbies to have the address of every one of his men entered in a large book,

which enabled periodical gifts to arrive if there was any illness in the family.

"It's over there, girlie," he said, with a sleepy smile. "What do you want it for?"

"Mrs. Tracy has just had a baby," she announced, turning over the leaves.

But it was not under the T's that she looked. Mendle, Morgan, Morrison . . . Morrison, John, 9, Castle Road. . . . Thoughtfully she closed the book, and put it back in its proper place. Then she crossed the room, and kissed her father lovingly on his bald head.

"You're a dear old thing," she whispered. "Go and play billiards with the general. . . ."

A few minutes later she was driving her little runabout towards Castle Road. An onlooker, had he been able to see under the thick veil she wore, would have been struck with the likeness of the small determined face to that of old John Frenton. Like her father—once she came to a decision, she required some stopping. And since her fiancé had left after lunch she had become more and more uneasy, more and more certain that something was being kept from her—something which concerned the Honourable Herbert pretty closely. And if it concerned him, it concerned her: she, as she had told him, had brought him into the firm. . . .

Castle Road proved to be a better neighbourhood than she had expected. Most of the hands preferred to live nearer to the works, and this street struck her as being more suitable for well-to-do clerks. But she was far too preoccupied to worry overmuch with such trifles: John Morrison and the truth were what she

wanted. She left the car at the end of the street, and walked to Number 9.

Yes. Mr. Morrison was at home. A disapproving sniff preceded the opening of a sitting-room door, which closed with a bang behind her. She heard the steps of the landlady going down the stairs, and then she took an uncertain pace forward.

". . . I . . ." she stammered. Undoubtedly the man in evening clothes facing her was John Morrison, but he looked so different. And whoever had heard of a factory hand getting into a smoking jacket for dinner? . . . And the room. . . . The prints on the walls: the big roll-top desk: golf clubs in the corner, and to cap everything—a gun-case.

"I think there must be some mistake," she said, haltingly. "I must apologise. . . . I . . ." She turned as if to leave the room. . . .

"I hope not, Miss Frenton." She gave a little start: she had hoped he had not recognised her. "Won't you come and sit down by the fire and tell me what I can do for you?"

After a moment's hesitation she did as he said.

"You must admit, Mr. Morrison," she loosened her veil as she spoke, "that there is some excuse for my surprise."

The man glanced round the room with a slight smile.

"Yes," he murmured. "I can understand it causing you a slight shock. Had I known you were coming I would have tried to make it less—er—startling."

"What on earth are you doing in the works?" she asked, curiously.

"My poor concerns will keep, Miss Frenton." A

charming smile robbed the words of any offence. "I don't think it was to discuss me that you came to-night. My note, I suppose. Am I to be rebuked?"

"No," she answered, slowly. "I am to be enlightened, please."

"Have you spoken to Strongley about it?" he asked, after a pause.

She raised her eyebrows.

"I asked *Mr.* Strongley what was the matter with the men, after lunch to-day."

"I stand corrected." With an expressionless face John Morrison held out a heavy silver cigarette box to her, but she shook her head.

"No, thank you," she said, curtly, and he replaced the box on the table. "But please smoke yourself, if you want to."

"And what did Mr. Strongley say?" asked the man.

"Nothing." She stared at the fire with a little frown. "He didn't seem to know: but he said he'd find out and ring me up. He hasn't done so, and I want to know, Mr. Morrison—know the truth. There's something radically wrong down there. What is it?"

John Morrison thoughtfully lit a cigarette and leaned against the mantelpiece, staring down at her.

"May I ask you one or two questions, Miss Frenton: questions which, though they may sound impertinent, are not intended in that spirit?"

"Yes." She looked up at him steadily. "But I don't promise to answer."

"How long ago did you meet Herbert Strongley?"

"About a year."

"And how long was it before you got engaged to him?"

She shifted a little in her chair.

"Not very long," she said at length.

He did not press the point: though a faint smile hovered for a moment on his lips.

"Not very long," he repeated, softly. "Are you quite sure, Miss Frenton—and this is a very important question—are you quite sure that you haven't made a mistake?"

"It may be important, but it's one I absolutely refuse to answer." She faced him angrily. "What business is it of yours?"

"Absolutely none—at the moment," he said, quietly. "But you've come to me to find out what the trouble is. And if you have not made any mistake with regard to your engagement, I advise you to carry out the suggestion contained in my note. Get your fiancé away from Frenton's, and keep him away, both before and after your marriage. It will come, I imagine, as a blow to your father, but you can easily turn it into a company."

"You mean—that the men don't like Herbert?" She forced herself to ask the question.

"I mean," he answered, deliberately, "that the men loathe and detest him, and that only the love they have for you and your father has staved off trouble up till now. And even that love will fail to avert a crisis after—well, after the regrettable episode that happened yesterday."

"What was it?" she demanded, and her voice sounded dead to the man.

"I don't think we need bother as to what it was," he said, quietly. "Shall we leave it at the fact that however excellent a husband Strongley may make, as the boss of Frenton's he is a complete failure." He bit his lip as he saw the look on the girl's face. Then he went on in the same quiet voice. "Things like this hurt, Miss Frenton: but you are the type that appreciates frankness. And I tell you quite openly that the men are after your fiancé. And I don't blame them."

"You side with them, do you?" She threw the words at him fiercely.

"Am I not one of them?" he replied, gravely.

"You know you're not." She stood up and faced him. "You're not one of the ordinary hands. Look at your evening clothes; look at that gun-case in the corner. . . ." She paused as she saw the sudden look on his face. "What is it?"

"Into this room quickly," he whispered. "You must stop there till he goes. Good Lord! What a complication!"

"Who is it?" she cried, startled by his evident agitation.

"Strongley," he whispered. "Heard his voice in the hall. Absolutely unexpected."

He closed the door, and she found herself in his bedroom, just as the landlady ushered in the second visitor.

And if Marjorie had been surprised on her first entrance to John Morrison's rooms, it was evident that the Honourable Herbert was even more so.

"Good Lord, man," he spluttered. "Why the glad

rags? I—er—of course, it's no business of mine, but your general appearance gave me a bit of a shock."

To the girl listening intensely on the other side of the door it seemed as if a note of relief had crept into her fiancé's voice—relief in which a certain amount of uneasiness was mingled.

"What can I do for you?" John Morrison asked, gravely.

"Well—er—don't you know"—undoubtedly the visitor was not at all sure of his ground—"your rooms and that sort of thing have rather knocked me. I mean—er—I'm rather in the soup, Morrison: and I really came round to ask your advice, don't you know. I mean you saw the whole thing—yesterday: and though I'm afraid I lost my temper with you, too, yet even at the time I saw you were different. And—er—I thought . . ."

The Honourable Herbert mopped his forehead and sank into a chair.

"The mere fact that I change for dinner doesn't seem to alter the situation appreciably," said Morrison, quietly.

"No, by Jove—I suppose not." The other sat up and braced himself for the plunge. "Well, what the hell am I to do? And what the devil are the men going to do? Are they going to strike?"

"No—I don't think so." Morrison smiled at the sudden look of relief on Strongley's face. "They're too fond of Mr. Frenton and his daughter. It's you they're after."

"What are they going to do?"

"Give you a pleasant half-hour under the steam-

hammer," said Morrison, deliberately, and the other rose with a stifled cry. "Just to test your nerves. Let it drop to within an inch of you—then stop it. And if that doesn't expedite your departure—they'll take other steps. . . ."

"But, damn it, Morrison," his voice was shaking—"don't you understand I can't go? I—er—Good Lord! do you suppose I want to stop here for one second longer than I must? I loathe it. Can't you stop 'em, man: tell 'em I'm clearing the instant I'm——"

"Married," said Morrison, quietly.

"Well, yes," said the other. "I'll have to be frank with you—and I can see you'll understand." His eyes strayed round the room. "I admit absolutely that this isn't my line: I detest the show. But old Frenton is wrapped up in these works—and—well—he looks for a son-in-law who will carry on. After I'm married I can explain things to him, don't you know. And until then—well, we must stave off this trouble, Morrison."

"Wouldn't it be a little more straightforward to explain your views to him before the marriage?"

"Perhaps it would have been," said the other, with apparent frankness. "But it's too late now—and then there's that damned show yesterday. That's what I'm so afraid will come out." He stared at the fire. "I didn't mean to hurt the fellow," he went on, querulously. "And I'm certain he dropped that spanner on my toe on purpose."

"Still, that hardly seems sufficient justification for slogging a boy, who is not quite all there, over the head with an iron bar, does it?" Almost unconsciously his eyes travelled to the bedroom door as he spoke, and

then he grew suddenly rigid. For the door was open, and the girl stood between the two rooms with a look of incredulous horror on her face.

"So that's what was the matter with Jake," she said, slowly, and at the sound of her voice Strongley swung round with a violent start.

"Marjorie . . ." he gasped, "what on earth . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me at the beginning?" she demanded, staring at him with level eyes. "Why lie about it? It seems so unnecessary and petty. And then—to hit Jake over the head. . . . You, . . . Take it back, please." She laid her engagement ring on the table. "And I think you'd better go—at once. The fault was partially mine; and I wouldn't like them to punish you for my—for my mistake. . . ."

Without another word she turned and left the room. And it was not till the front door banged that Strongley turned his livid face on John Morrison.

"You swine," he muttered. "I believe this was a put-up job."

John Morrison laughed.

"Yes—you told me you were coming, didn't you?"

"No—I didn't tell you," said Strongley, slowly with a vicious look dawning in his eyes. "Which perhaps accounts for the fact that Miss Frenton was here. . . . In your bedroom. . . . How nice. . . . The gentleman workman and the employer's daughter. . . . A charming romance. . . . I should think Mr. Frenton will be delighted to hear it to-morrow. . . ."

Not a muscle on John Morrison's face moved.

"More than delighted, I should imagine. . . . Except that it will be a little stale. Personally, I am

going up to tell him to-night." He smiled slightly. "I don't like you, Strongley; I know far too much about you. But I *did* pass Miss Frenton a note to-day at the works warning her to get you away. . . ."

"Your solicitude for my welfare is overwhelming," sneered Strongley.

"Good heavens!" laughed John Morrison. "I didn't care a damn about you. I was afraid the men might get into trouble. Steady! Don't get gay with me. I'm not half-witted; and I can hit back. . . ."

III

It was in London the following spring that Marjorie Frenton next saw John Morrison. She had not been present at the interview with her father—was in ignorance that it had ever taken place until the next day. And on that next day John Morrison had disappeared, leaving no trace. . . . For a while she had waited, wondering whether he would write—but no word came. After all, why should he? There was nothing to write about. . . . It was merely curiosity on her part—nothing more, of course. . . . A workman in evening clothes. . . . Enough to make anybody curious. . . .

And now there he was—three tables away, dining with a very pretty woman. He hadn't seen her yet. . . . Probably wouldn't remember her when he did. . . . After all, why should he? . . . And at that moment their eyes met. . . .

She looked away at once, and started talking to the man next to her: but even as she spoke she knew John Morrison had risen and was coming towards her.

"How are you, Miss Frenton?" She looked up into his face: met the glint of a smile in the lazy blue eyes.

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Morrison," she answered, coldly.

"Hullo, Joe!" A woman opposite had begun to speak, to stop with a puzzled frown at Marjorie's words. "Morrison! Why Morrison? . . . Have you been masquerading, Joe, under an assumed name?"

"I did for a while, Jane," he said, calmly, "to avoid you; you know how you pursued me with eligible girls. . . . Battalions of 'em, Miss Frenton—ranged in rows. I had to disappear stealthily in the dead of night. . . ."

"Well, when are you going to get married?" demanded the woman, laughing.

"Very soon, I hope. . . . I do much better than you, Jane, in these things. The girl I've got my eye on is a girl who summoned several hundred factory hands together; and told 'em she was sorry for a mistake she'd made. And she halted a bit, and stumbled a bit—but she got through with it. . . . And then the men cheered 'emselves sick. . . ."

"Good heavens! Joe . . . Factory hands!" gasped the woman. "What sort of a girl is she?"

"A perfect topper, Jane." Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Marjorie, whose eyes were fixed on her plate. "By the way, Miss Frenton, has your father turned his works into a company yet?"

"Not yet," she answered, very low.

"Ah! that's good." He forced her to meet his eyes, and there was something more than a smile on his face now. "Well, I must go back to my sister. . . . And

I'll come and call to-morrow if I may. . . . Jane will expose my wicked deceit doubtless. . . ."

"Mad—quite mad," remarked the woman opposite, as he went back to his interrupted dinner. "Morrison, did you say? I knew he wanted to study labour conditions first-hand—why, Heaven knows. He's got works of his own or something. . . . But all the Carlakes are mad. . . . And I'd got a splendid American girl up my sleeve for him. . . ."

"Carlake," said Marjorie, a little faintly. "Is that Lord Carlake?"

"Of course it is, my dear. That's Joe Carlake. . . . Mad as a hatter. . . . I wonder who the girl is? . . ."

VI

THE UNBROKEN LINE

I

MY dear man, where have you been buried? You don't seem to know anybody. That's Bobby Landon, Lord Fingarton's only son. Just about to pull off *the* marriage of the season."

I accepted the rebuke meekly: a spell of three years in Africa investigating the question of sleeping sickness does almost count as burial.

"Oh! is that Lord Landon?" I murmured, glancing across the crowded restaurant at a clean-looking youngster dining with a couple of men. "See—who is he engaged to?"

"You win the bag of nuts," laughed my fair informant. "Robert Landon, only son of Earl Fingarton of Fingarton, is about to marry Cecilie, youngest daughter of the Duke of Sussex. A fuller society announcement can be given if required, bringing out the pleasing union of two historic families in these socialistic days. . . ." She laughed again. "But speaking the normal mother tongue, a first-class boy is marrying a topping girl, which is all that matters."

"It's all coming back to me," I said, slowly. "I'm getting warm. There was another son, wasn't there, and he died?"

"I believe so," she answered; "in fact I know there was. But he died before I was born. That was the first wife's son. Daddy would be able to tell you all about that."

"What's that, my dear?" My host leaned across the table with a smile.

"Sir Richard was asking me about Lord Fingarton's family history, old man," she remarked, brightly. "I was telling him that I was slightly on the youthful side, and that you would elucidate the matter in your well-known breezy style. . . ."

"It doesn't require much elucidation," he said, slowly. "It was a mixture of tragedy and good fortune. . . ."

"I remember that the first son died, Bill, but . . ." I paused and waited for him to continue.

"He broke his neck in the hunting field the day after he came of age. And the accident broke his mother's heart. They were absolutely wrapped up in that boy—both of 'em. . . . Six months later she died in Scotland, at Fingarton. . . ." He puffed thoughtfully at his cigar, and unconsciously my eyes wandered to the youngster at the neighbouring table.

"And where exactly does the good-fortune part of it come in?" I asked at length.

"This way," he answered. "They idolised the boy, and he certainly was the first thing in their lives. But when he died, the thing that came only one degree behind their love for him of necessity took first place. . . . Family. . . . While he lived, the two things were synonymous: they both centred in the boy himself. . . . And he was a splendid boy—better even than this one." Again he paused, and smoked for a while in

silence. "You see—Betty Fingarton was too old to have another child, when the accident took place . . . I think that fact hastened her death. And the man who would have come into the title was an outsider of the purest water—a distant cousin of sorts. . . . Bob used to move about like a man in a dream—dazed with the tragedy of it all. But I remember that even then, before she died, he realised that her death would—how shall I put it—help matters. Not that he ever said anything: but I knew Bob pretty well those days . . . I've lost sight of him a bit since. . . . It was a horrible position for the poor old chap. The Fingartons have kept their line direct since 1450. Family was his God . . . and he idolised Betty. Then she died; and Bob married again. . . . Quite a nice girl, and she made him a thundering good wife. . . . But he told me the night before he married, that the price of duty could sometimes be passing high. . . . It was with him. . . ."

My host paused and sipped his brandy, while the girl at my side whispered a little breathlessly:

"I didn't know all that, daddy. Poor old Uncle Bob!"

I looked at her inquiringly, and she smiled.

"He's always been uncle to me," she explained. "Though lately I've hardly seen him at all. . . . He buries himself more and more up at Fingarton. . . ."

"And what of the present Lady Fingarton?" I inquired.

"I like her—she's a dear," answered the girl. "Though I think daddy always compares her with the first one." Her father smiled, but said nothing. "She

is generally here in Town. . . . She likes to be near Bobby. . . ."

For a while we were silent, while the soft strains of the orchestra stole through the smoke-laden air above the hum of conversation. . . . It had gripped me—the picture painted by Bill Lakington, in his short, clipped sentences. The tragedy of it—and, as he had said, the good fortune too. . . . Duty; pride of family —aye, they have their price. Mayhap Betty Fingarton was paying her share in the knowledge that the next of the line was not her son. . . . Or did she, with clearer vision, understand the workings of the Great Architect, which at first must have seemed so inscrutable? . . .

"When is the wedding?" I asked.

"In about a month," said the girl. "Everyone will be there."

"Personally," I murmured, "I shall be one of the forty or fifty-odd million who won't. So you can send me an account of it."

"Where are you going, Sir Richard?"

"To a little village way up in the outskirts of Skye," I replied, with a smile. "More burial, young lady—and more hard work."

"You ought to take a bit of a rest, Dick," said Bill Lakington. "You deserve it. . . ."

"After I've broken the back of the book, I shall," I answered.

"Are you writing a novel, Sir Richard?" inquired the girl.

"No such claim to immortality," I sighed. "My subject is the mode of life of Glossina palpales—with illustrations."

"And who are they when they're at home?" she asked, dubiously.

"Flies—whose conduct is not above suspicion. Shall I present you with a copy?"

"Rather. As long as you don't expect me to read it——Hullo! Bob. Going to anything to-night?"

"We're staggering to Daly's, old thing. . . ." With a feeling of mild curiosity I glanced at the boy who had paused by our table on the way out: a clean-cut, good-looking youngster. No outsider, this future seventeenth earl, like the distant cousin. . . . Yes, one could see where the good fortune came in. . . .

We, too, were going to Daly's, and we all passed out of the restaurant together. I had a word or two with the youngster as we waited for the car: he was keen as mustard on hearing about Africa, and especially Uganda. . . .

"Everybody is tottering out to the country these days, Sir Richard, and 'pon my word, I don't blame 'em. . . ."

"If they can, no more do I. But the head of the family can't go, my dear boy. . . . That's the drawback to responsibility."

"Do you know Fingarton?" A gleam came into his eyes as he spoke.

"I'm afraid I don't," I answered. "I never met your father."

"Go and look him up, if you're in those parts," he said, impulsively. "It'll do the dear old governor good. . . . He's burying himself too much up there, and it's lonely for him. I've written and written just lately, and I can't get any answer out of him. . . . I want

him to come South—he will for my wedding, of course —but these last few months, if ever I do get a line from him, it's in reply to a letter about three weeks old. . . ."

"Come on, Sir Richard. . . ." Molly Lakington was calling me from the car. . . . "We mustn't miss the last part of the first act. . . ."

Undoubtedly not, and with a nod to the youngster I stepped into the car.

"A good lad that, Bill," I remarked.

"Aye . . . a good lad. . . . But not *quite* so good as the other," he answered, thoughtfully.

"He's good enough for Cecilie, anyway, old man, and that's saying a good deal," said Molly. . . .

By the light of a passing lamp I saw Bill Lakington's face. He was smiling quietly to himself, as a man smiles when he has his own opinion, but refuses to argue about it. . . .

"Besides, you scarcely knew the first son," pursued Molly. "I've heard you say so yourself."

"No, my dear, but I knew the first wife," answered her father, still with the same quiet smile. Evidently, on the subject of Betty Fingarton, Bill was adamant.

And at that moment we drew up at Daly's, and the conversation ceased. We were in time for the last part of the first act as the girl had demanded—though apparently one priceless song about a Bowwow named Chow-chow had eluded us. . . . My sorrow at this failure on our part was heightened by the information that it was one of the best Fox Trots you could dance to. . . . I was very anxious to know what a Fox Trot was: in Uganda, as a form of amusement, it is in but little vogue. . . .

But we'd missed it, and though I endeavoured to bear up under the staggering blow, I found my attention wandering more and more from the stage, and centring round the story of the sixteenth Earl Fingarton and his first wife, Betty.

The picture of the old man, shutting himself up more and more in his Highland castle, waiting for the time when he could be relieved of duty, and go once more to the woman he loved, came between me and the stage. . . . *His* child to carry on the line, but not *hers*. . . . But it would be carried on in direct descent—that was the great point—it would remain unbroken. The sacrifice of the father had had its reward. . . .

"There is Lady Fingarton in the box opposite," said Molly Lakington in my ear, as the lights went up at the end of the first act. . . . "Sitting next to Bobby . . . and Cecilie on the other side."

I glanced across the theatre. The youngster was just getting up to go out and smoke, and for a moment or two he bent over a lovely girl, who smiled up into his face. Then he turned to his mother, and she, too, smiled —a smile of perfect happiness. She was a sweet-looking woman of rising fifty, and on a sudden impulse I spoke my thoughts to Bill Lakington.

"He ought to come down, Bill: he oughtn't to bury himself. He'd like it—once he'd broken away. It's not fair to them—or himself. Why doesn't he?"

"I can't tell you, old man . . ." he answered, slowly. "I know no more than you. He's happy up North: when he does come he's always hankering to get back again."

"But they go up there, I suppose?"

"Sometimes," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Sometimes. But never for long. . . . When shooting starts, and he has guests."

"I agree with Sir Richard," said Molly, decidedly. "It's not fair. He's got the son he wanted, and now he sees as little of the woman who gave it him as he can. . . . He ought at any rate to pretend. . . ."

The orchestra was filing back: the smokers were returning to their seats. And as the safety-curtain rolled slowly up, I glanced once more across the theatre at Lady Fingarton. Did she feel that too? And it seemed to me that her eyes were weary. . . . He ought at any rate to pretend. . . .

II

And so, but for a strange turn in the wheel of fate, the matter would have rested as far as I was concerned. For an evening the story of the sixteenth Earl Fingarton and his wife Betty had appealed to my imagination, then stress of work drove it from my mind. In Scotland, especially in the Highlands, the fierce pride of family and clan seems natural and right: from time immemorial that pride has been a dominant trait of those who live there.

And up in Skye, where I wandered for a while before settling down to work, the old Earl's action seemed easier to understand. . . . As a man, his heart had died with his wife Betty; as the sixteenth of his line, he had gone forth into the world, which had ceased to interest him, and taking unto himself another wife, had

waited until she gave him a son. Then, his duty over, he had come back to his dead and his memories. . . . Callous, perhaps, to the living; primitive in his treatment of his second wife, as men of old were primitive in their treatment of women, regarding them as merely the bearers of their children—yet understandable. . . . Look on the glory of Glen Sligachan, and it is understandable. Country such as that in another part of the Highlands belonged to the Fingartons, and the breathless marvel of it is not to be lightly parted with. It must remain for a man's son, and his son's son . . . a sacred heritage. There must be no outsider to break the line.

Thus did it strike me as I settled down to work in the island that I loved. And then, as I have said, it gradually faded from my mind. Vast tracts of territory at present infested with sleeping sickness could, I felt convinced, be rendered immune from that dreadful scourge if my proposals were adopted. Starting from the point at which the German Commission under Professor Koch had left off, years before the war, I had carried his investigations several steps further. And I knew that I had been successful. So I found an undisturbed place to write, and quickly became absorbed in my task. Without undue conceit, I knew it was an important one. . . .

And then, one evening, after I had been working for about a fortnight, occurred the strange turn of the wheel which was to bring my attention back from the dark interior of Africa to things much nearer at hand. I had finished for the day, and was sitting by the open window watching the sun sink in a blaze of golden

glory over the Coolin Hills, when a small urchin obtruded himself into my line of vision, and stared at me fixedly in the intervals of sucking his thumb. The inspection apparently proved satisfactory, and after a while the small urchin spoke. His language required interpretation by my landlady, but finally I gathered that the attentions of a medical man were wanted. And since the local doctor was away, he wanted to know whether I would come.

"It's for Mrs. MacDerry, sir," explained my landlady. "She's old and ailing fast."

No doctor can disregard a call of such a sort, and though I had certainly not come to Skye with the idea of attending to the local man's practice during his absence, I followed my small guide to a little house some half a mile away. He left me at the door, and after a moment's hesitation I knocked. It was opened almost at once by a somewhat stern and forbidding-looking woman, who stared at me suspiciously, and then curtly inquired what I wanted.

"Nothing," I answered, a little nettled by her tone. "But from the boy who led me here I gathered you wanted a doctor."

"It was Doctor Lee I sent him for," she snapped.

"Well, Doctor Lee is out," I replied. "But doubtless he will be back soon, so I'll go away."

I turned away, distinctly annoyed at my reception, and was on the point of passing through the little gate when the woman overtook me.

"Are you a clever doctor?" she demanded.

"I have been told so," I remarked, suppressing a smile.

"Then come inside and see what you can do for my mistress."

"Is your mistress Mrs. MacDerry?"

"Aye," she nodded. "It's herself." Without another word she turned and led the way up the narrow path, apparently taking it for granted that I would follow.

"What's the matter with your mistress?" I asked as I reached the door.

"If you're clever you'll find out for yourself," she remarked, tersely, and again I suppressed a smile. An uncompromising handmaiden this. . . .

She left me alone in the room which in such houses is generally alluded to as the parlour, and while I waited I stared about me idly. And as I stared my vague curiosity gave way to acute surprise. Generally the furniture in such rooms must be seen to be believed: stuffed birds in glass domes, and beaded ornaments of incredible design meet one at every step. And should one lift one's eyes in a moment of panic to the walls, innumerable photographs of wedding groups leap at you in mute protest. But there was nothing of that sort in this room. . . .

Everything was in the most exquisite taste, from the bric-à-brac on a beautiful inlaid table, to the baby Grand standing in the corner. I glanced at some of the pictures, and my surprise changed to amazement. Three at least were genuine Corots. . . . And the next things that caught my eye were half a dozen pieces of Sèvres. . . .

"Will you come this way, please?" The woman's harsh voice from the door interrupted my inspection,

and I followed her slowly up the stairs. I found Mrs. MacDerry propped up in bed awaiting me. The bedroom, in the quick glance I took around it, seemed in keeping with the room below; then my attention centred on my patient. She was an old lady—sweet and fragile-looking as her own Sèvres china—and it needed but a glance to see that the fires were burning low. For Mrs. MacDerry the harbour was almost reached.

"It is good of you to come, Doctor——" She paused inquiringly.

"Morton is my name," I answered, gently, drawing up a chair beside the bed.

"Doctor Lee seems to be out," she continued, "and—and . . ."

Her voice died away, and she lay back on her pillows, while the harsh-voiced woman bent over her with a look of such infinite love on her weather-beaten face that I inwardly marvelled at the transformation.

"You see"—the invalid opened her eyes again as my fingers closed round the weak, fluttering pulse—"it's very important, Doctor Morton, that I should see my husband. . . . He has been up in London, and came down by the mail from Euston last night. . . . So he should be here in a few hours, shouldn't he?"

"He should," I answered, taking out a notebook and pencil. "Don't talk, Mrs. MacDerry . . . just rest."

I scribbled a few lines and handed the paper to the maid. I knew only the simplest drugs would be available, and it was going to be a stiff fight to keep the feeble flame alight even for a few hours.

"Either go yourself, or send the boy at once to the

nearest chemist for those drugs," I whispered. "There's no time to be lost. . . ."

She left the room without a word, and once more the weak voice came from the bed.

"Can you do it, doctor? can you keep me . . . till my husband comes?"

"Of course, Mrs. MacDerry, and long after he's come," I said, cheerfully; but she only shook her head with a faint smile.

"You can't deceive me," she whispered. . . . "Besides, I don't want to stay on. . . . It's finished—now; only I just want to hear from his own lips that it went off well. . . . That it's not all been in vain. . . ."

And then for a while she lay very still—so still that once I thought she had gone. But she stirred again, and said a few words which I could not catch. Faintly through the open window came the ceaseless murmur of the distant sea, while from a dozen cottages on the hillside opposite little yellow beams of light shone out serenely into the darkening night. And after a while I rose and lit the lamp, shading it from the face of the woman in the bed. One swift glance I stole at her, and she was sleeping with a look of ineffable peace on her face. . . . Then once more I sat down to wait. . . .

It was an hour before the maid returned with the drugs, and the slight noise she made as she entered the room roused the sleeper. . . .

"Has he come?" she cried, eagerly, only to sink back again with a tired sigh as the maid shook her head.

"He couldn't be here yet, Mrs. MacDerry," I said, reassuringly. "Not for an hour or two. . . . And now I want you to drink this, please. . . ."

Without a word she did as I told her, and once again closed her eyes.

I beckoned to the maid. "Get a hot bottle. And a little brandy. . . ."

"Can you do it, doctor?" she said, gripping my arm tight. "Can you let him see her alive?"

"Yes—I think so. . . . But he will have to come to-night."

She left the room, and for a while I stood by the window staring out into the night. Was it my imagination, or did I see the head-lights of a car coming over the pass in the distance? He would have to come that way if he'd crossed from Kyle to Lochalsh. . . . But they had vanished again, and I couldn't remember if the road dipped behind a rise there or not. . . .

"Do you often go to London, Doctor Morton?" The invalid's voice was a little stronger, and I crossed to the bed.

"Very often, Mrs. MacDerry," I answered. "In fact, except when I'm abroad, I generally live there. At the moment I've come up here to work. . . ."

"Ah! I see. . . ." She smiled faintly. "I haven't been to London for over twenty years. I haven't left Skye for over twenty years. . . . I suppose it's changed a lot. . . ."

"Yes—I think you'd find it different to twenty years ago. . . . Motors everywhere instead of hansoms. . . ."

"I've never been in a motor-car," she said, still with the same sweet smile. "I've been buried, doctor—just buried. . . ."

"You could not have chosen a lovelier tomb," I answered, gently; and she nodded her head.

"Those are three delightful Corots you have downstairs," I continued after a moment. "I was admiring them before I came up. . . ."

She looked at me quickly.

"You know about such things, do you?"

"I'm a collector myself in a mild way," I answered.

"They belong to my husband," she said, abruptly, and once more closed her eyes. "Tell me, doctor," she continued after a while, "what is happening in London?"

"The usual things, Mrs. MacDerry. . . . In that respect I don't think there is much change since you were there. The world dances and goes to theatres as ever. . . ."

"But is there no big event," she persisted, "in the season this year? . . . No big ball . . . or . . . or marriage?"

"Why, yes," I answered, "there's a big marriage. . . . It's just taken place. . . ." And though I saw those two fragile hands clenched tight, no suspicion dawned on me as I spoke. "Lord Fingarton's only son has just married the Duke of Sussex's youngest daughter. . . ."

"And what do they say of Lord Fingarton's only son?" she demanded. "Is he a worthy successor of his father?"

"They say that he's a good lad," I answered. "I thought so myself when I spoke to him the other night. . . ."

"You spoke to him?" she cried. "Tell me about him—everything you can. . . ."

And still I did not suspect. . . . I told her of the boy; I sketched him for her to the best of my ability,

and she listened eagerly. And then when I had finished, something—I know not what—made me add one sentence for which, till my dying day, I shall be thankful.

"There is only one criticism," I said, "which I can make. And that was given by a man who knew the first Lady Fingarton well. Good though this boy is—he is not *quite* so good as the one who died. . . ."

"Who was the man who said that?" she whispered, breathlessly.

"Sir William Lakington—the great heart specialist," I answered, and at that moment clear and distinct through the still night came the thrumming of a motor-car.

"Is it—my husband?" She listened tensely, and I crossed to the window. The car had stopped outside the gate, and already a man was striding up the narrow path to the front door.

"He has come, Mrs. MacDerry," I said, cheerfully. . . . "Now I want you to have another drink of this. . . ." I poured out the dose, and as I held the glass to her lips, the bedroom door gently opened and a man came in. I glanced up at him to ensure silence, and met a pair of piercing eyes, which were staring at me from under great bushy eyebrows. His huge frame seemed to fill the whole doorway; then, on tiptoe he crept towards the bed.

I laid the glass down, and turned away. My part was over, save for a word of warning. And so I beckoned to him, and he followed me to the window.

"You have not got long, Mr. MacDerry," I whispered. "The sands are very low." It was then that I

noticed a huge roll of illustrated papers under his arm. "I shall be downstairs: call me if you want me."

"Is it the end?" he whispered, and I bowed gravely.

"It is the end," I answered.

I heard him whisper, "Thank God I was in time"; and then I left them together.

For maybe half an hour I sat in the room downstairs. Once the maid came in to know if I would have anything to eat, and after that the house grew very silent. Only the murmur of a man's deep voice above broke the stillness, and at length, that, too, ceased. And then suddenly I heard him calling me from the landing, and went upstairs.

One glance was enough, and he looked at my face and understood. Mechanically I stooped and picked up one of the papers that had slipped off the bed: then I moved away. . . . I could do no more for the sweet old lady: she had passed beyond all earthly aid.

I put the paper on the table within the circle of light thrown by the lamp. It was a copy of the *Tatler*, open at the page of photographs taken at the big wedding. There was one of young Landon and his bride—a good photo: and then I found myself staring foolishly at one of the others. I bent forward to examine it closer; there was no mistaking the great spare frame and thick eyebrows. Why had Robert, sixteenth Earl of Fingarton, rushed post haste from the wedding of his son to the death-bed of Mrs. MacDerry? And why had she called him—husband? . . .

III

It was the following day that, closely muffled up, he came into my room as I worked.

"Do I disturb you, Sir Richard?" he asked as I rose.

So he had made inquiries about my name. . . .

"Not at all," I answered, gravely. "Sit down."

He took the chair I indicated, and for a while he stared at me in silence.

"It was unfortunate that Doctor Lee was out," he said at length. "And Hannah—the maid—had naturally no idea who you were. I, on the contrary, know you well by reputation. . . ."

I bowed silently.

"And you know me, Sir Richard?"

Again I bowed.

For a while he drummed with his fingers on the table, then once again he fixed his piercing eyes on me.

"I want you to listen to a short story," he said, quietly. "It's very short, and"—his voice shook a little—"your reception of it is very important. I am no spinner of glib phrases: I have no tricks of speech to captivate your imagination. But I have an idea that the story I have to tell requires no assistance. Nearly fifty years ago a son was born to a certain man and his wife. He was their only child; the woman was not strong enough to have another. But that son was enough: he was the heir that was needed to an historic house. . . . And then there was an accident, and the boy broke his neck out hunting. . . ."

He broke off and stared out of the window. "The woman was too old to have another child," he went

on after a while, "and so it seemed that that historic name would pass out of the direct line. And it would go to a man who had recently been expelled from his London clubs for cheating at cards. . . . He was openly boasting of his good fortune: had already started to raise money on his prospects. . . ." He paused again, his great fists clenched.

"A few months later the woman fell ill. And though she loved the man as it is given to few men to be loved, she was glad—for the sake of his family. She thought she was going to die, and then he could marry again. . . . She prayed to die, and her prayer was not heard, though maybe it was one of the most divinely unselfish prayers that a human heart has ever raised. . . . Then one night, as she was recovering, the man found her with a glass of something by her bedside. . . . And he didn't leave her till she had sworn that she would not take that way out. . . ."

He shifted restlessly in his seat. "It was about then that the plan was conceived. It was hazy at first, and the man would have none of it. . . . But after a while he began to think of it more and more. . . . And, one day, to his amazement he found that the woman had an unexpected ally in the shape of the heart specialist who was attending her."

"Who was the heart specialist?" I asked, quietly.

"Sir William Lakington," he answered. "You see, Sir Richard, through a turn of fate, this man is in your hands. He has no intention of hiding anything from you. . . . That same day the prospective heir, who had married a barmaid, became the father of twin sons; and the man made up his mind. The woman died,

and was buried in the family vault. . . . Such was the story that was told the world. And then, with the help of that great-hearted doctor, the woman was smuggled away. For twenty-four years she has lived by herself with only one maid—buried, scarce daring to leave the house, in case she should be recognised. Through those long years the man has visited her just now and then. . . . Not too often, again for fear of discovery, though when he did come he came disguised, save only last night, when nothing mattered but the fact that it was the end. And through those long years her only mainstay has been the knowledge that *his* son will succeed to the title—that the line is still direct. . . . Fate decreed it was not to be hers; but no word of complaint or disappointment has ever passed her lips. Maybe they did wrong—that man and that woman: maybe they sinned. But they did it for the best at the time, and when ten years afterwards the man who would have been the heir was confined in an inebriates' home, it seemed to them that they had been justified. And now in your hands, Sir Richard, rests the issue as to whether that sweet woman's sacrifice shall have been in vain. . . . Rests also the issue of a dreadful scandal. . . ."

The deep voice ceased, and I rose and stood by the window. The sun was glinting on the hills opposite, bathing them in a riot of purple and gold: a cart was moving lazily along the rough track below the house. . . . Maybe it had been a sin; who was I to judge? The risk was over now, the sacrifice finished. And God knows that sacrifice had been heavy. At the time they had done it for the best: that best was good enough for me.

"You have told me a very wonderful story, Mr. MacDerry," I said, as I turned and faced him. "For a short time I foolishly confused you with Lord Fingarton: I must apologise for my mistake. May I express my deepest sympathy with you in your terrible loss, and assure you that I will attend to all the necessary formalities with regard to Mrs. MacDerry's death? . . ."

For a moment I thought he would break down: instead he took my hand and wrung it. . . . And then without a word he was gone.

. . . . . .

It was a year later that I went with Bill Lakington to the christening of a man-child. They are not entertainments that I generally patronise, but this was an exception. Judging by the noise it contributed to the performance, it was a fine, lusty child: certainly its parents seemed more than usually idiotic about it.

"He's aged, Dick," said Bill to me after it was over. "Bob's aged badly."

Coming towards us down the aisle was a tall gaunt man, whose piercing eyes gleamed triumphantly from under his bushy eyebrows. He stopped as he reached us, and held out a hand to each. And so for a moment we stood in silence. . . . Then he spoke:

"The line is unbroken, old friends—the line is unbroken."

Without another word he was gone.

VII

THE REAL TEST

I

IT depends entirely," remarked the Great Doctor, twirling an empty wine-glass in his long, sensitive fingers, "what you mean by fear. The common interpretation of the word—the method which I think you would use to portray it on the stage"—he turned to the Celebrated Actor, who was helping himself to a cigarette from a silver box on the table in front of him—"would show a nervous shrinking from doing a thing: a positive distaste to it—a probable refusal, finally, to carry out the action. And rightly or wrongly—but very naturally—that emotion is the object of universal scorn. But—" and the Great Doctor paused thoughtfully—"is there no more in fear than that?"

The Well-known Soldier drained his port. "It would be a platitude to remark," he said, "that the successful overcoming of fear is the highest form of bravery."

"That if, for instance, our young friend had overcome his fear this afternoon," said the Rising Barrister, "and had jumped in after that horrible little dog, it would have been an act of the highest bravery."

"Or the most stupid bravado," supplemented the Celebrated Actor.

"Precisely my point," exclaimed the Great Doctor. "What is the dividing line between bravado and bravery?"

The Well-known Soldier looked thoughtful. "The man," he said at length, "who exposes himself to being killed or wounded when there is no necessity, with probably—at the bottom of his mind—a desire to show off, is guilty of culpable bravado. The man who, when his battalion is faltering, exposes himself to certain death to hold them, is brave."

"Two extreme cases," answered the Doctor. "Narrow it down, General. What is the dividing line?"

"I suppose," murmured the Soldier, "when the results justify the sacrifice. No man has a right to throw his life away uselessly."

"In those circumstances," said the Rising Barrister, "there can be no fixed dividing line. Every man must decide for himself; and what is bravery to you, might be bravado in me."

The Doctor nodded. "Undoubtedly," he agreed. "And with a thoughtful man that decision may be very difficult. For the fraction of a second he will hesitate—weigh up the pros and cons; and even if he decides to do it finally, it may then be too late."

"Only a fool would have gone in after that dog," said the Actor, dogmatically.

"Women love fools," answered the Barrister, *à propos* of nothing in particular; and the Celebrated Actor snorted contemptuously.

"Which is why the man who is reputed to know no

fear is so universally popular," said the Soldier. "If such a man exists, he is most certainly a fool."

The door opened and their hostess put her head into the room. "You men have got to come and dance," she cried. "There's no good looking at one another and hoping for bridge: you can have that afterwards."

The strains of a gramophone came faintly from the drawing-room as they rose dutifully.

"I cannot perpetrate these new atrocities, dear lady," remarked the Soldier, "but if anybody would like to have a barn dance, I shall be happy to do my best."

"Sybil shall take you in hand, Sir John," she answered, leading the way across the hall. "By the way, young Captain Seymour, the V.C. flying-man, has come up. Such a nice boy—so modest and unassuming."

As they entered the room a fresh one-step had just started, and for a while they stood watching. The two sons of the house, just home from Eton, were performing vigorously with two pretty girls from a neighbouring place; while Sybil, their sister, who was to take the General in hand, floated past in the arms of a keen-eyed, bronzed young man who had won the V.C. for a flying exploit that read like a fairy-tale. The other two couples were girls dancing together; while, seated on a sofa, knitting placidly, were two elderly ladies.

"And where, Lady Vera," murmured the Actor to his hostess, "is our young friend Peter?"

She frowned almost imperceptibly and looked away. "He disappeared after he left the dining-room," she

remarked, shortly. "I suppose, in view of what occurred this afternoon, he prefers to be by himself."

The Actor ran a delicate hand through his magnificent grey hair—it was a gesture for which he was famous—and regarded his hostess in surprise. "Even you, Lady Vera!" he remarked, pensively. "I can understand these young girls blaming the boy; but for you—a woman of sense——" He shrugged his shoulders—another world-famed movement, feebly imitated by lesser lights.

"I don't think we will discuss the matter, Mr. Deering," she said, turning away a little abruptly.

It had been a somewhat unpleasant incident at the time, and the unpleasantness was still apparently far from over. Madge Saunderson, one of the girls stopping in the house, had been the owner of a small dog of rat-like appearance and propensities, to which she had been devoted. She shared this devotion with no one, the animal being of the type that secretes itself under chairs and nips the ankle of the next person who unsuspectingly sits down. However, *De mortuis* . . . And since its violent death that afternoon, Toots—which was the animal's name—had been invested with a halo. Its atrocious habits were forgotten: it lived in everyone's memory as poor little Toots.

It was over its death that Peter Benton had made himself unpopular. Not far from the house there was a disused mill, past which, at certain times of the year, the water poured in a black, evil-looking torrent, emerging below into a deep pond cupped out in

the rocks. For a hundred yards before the stream came to the old mill-wheel the slope of the ground affected it to such an extent that, if much rain had fallen in the hills above, the current was dangerous. The water swirled along, its smoothness broken only by an occasional eddy, till with ever-increasing speed it dropped sheer into the pond, twenty feet below. Occasionally battered things were found floating in that pond—stray animals which had got caught in the stream above; and twice since the mill had closed down twenty years ago a child had been discovered, bruised and dead, in the placid pool below the wheel. But, then, these had been small animals and children —quite unable to keep their feet. Whereas Peter Benton was a man, and tall at that.

Into this stream, flooded more than usual with the recent rain, had fallen poor little Toots. Being completely blind in both eyes, it had serenely waddled over the edge of the small hand-bridge which spanned the water, and had departed, struggling feebly, towards the mill-wheel seventy yards away. At the moment of the catastrophe Peter Benton and Madge Saunderson were standing on the bridge, and her scream of horror rang out simultaneously with the splash.

The man, seeing in an instant what had happened, raced along the bank, and overtook the dog when it had gone about half-way, at a point where the current quickened and seemed to leap ahead. And then had occurred the dreadful thing.

According to the girl, afterwards, he just stood there and watched Toots dashed to pieces. According

to the man—but, incidentally, he said nothing, which proved his cowardice, as the girl remarked. He had nothing to say. Instead of going into the water and seizing the dog, he had stood on the bank and let it drown. And he had no excuse. Of course, there would have been a certain element of risk; but no man who was a man would have thought of that. Not with poor little Toots drowning before his eyes.

And his remark at the moment when she had rushed up to him, almost hysterical with grief, showed him to be—well, perhaps it would be as well not to say what she thought. Madge Saunderson had paused in her narrative at tea and consumed a sugar cake.

"What *did* he say, Madge?" asked Sybil Lethbridge.

"He said," remarked Miss Saunderson, "'Sorry. No bon, as they say. It really wasn't worth it—not for Toots.' Can you beat it?" she stormed. "'Not for Toots!' Poor little heart—drowning before that brute's eyes."

"Of course," said Sybil, thoughtfully, "the millstream is very dangerous."

"My dear Sybil," answered Madge Saunderson, coldly, "if you're going to take that point of view I have nothing more to say. But I'd like to know what you'd have said if it had been Ruffles."

The terrier in question regarded the speaker with an expectant eye, in which thoughts of cake shone brightly.

"What happened then?" asked one of the audience.

"We walked in silence down to the pool below," continued Madge. "And there—we found him—my

little Toots. He floated to the side, and Mr. Benton was actually daring enough to stoop down and pull him out of the water. It was then that he added insult to injury," she went on, in a voice of suppressed fury. "'Rotten luck, Miss. Saunderson,' he said; 'but in a way it's rather a happy release for the poor little brute, isn't it? I'm afraid only your kind heart prevented him being put away years ago.'"

A silence had settled on the room, a silence which was broken at length by Sybil.

"He *was* very old, wasn't he?" she murmured.

Madge Saunderson's eyes flashed ominously. "Eighteen," she said. "And I quite fail to see that that's any excuse. You wouldn't let an old man of ninety drown, would you—just because he was old? And Toots was quite as human as any old man, and far less trouble."

Such had been the official *communiqué,* issued to a feminine gathering at tea-time; in due course it travelled to the rest of the house-party. And, as is the way with such stories, it had not lost in the telling.

Daisy Johnson, for instance, had retailed it with some gusto to the Rising Barrister.

"What a pity about Mr. Benton, isn't it?" she had murmured before dinner, moving a little so that the pink light from a lamp fell on her face. Pink, she reflected, was undoubtedly the colour she would have for all the shades when she had a house.

The Rising Barrister regarded her casually. "What is a pity?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard?" she cried. "Why, this after-

noon poor little Toots—Madge Saunderson's dog—fell into the mill-stream."

"Thank God!" ejaculated the Barrister, brutally.

"Oh, I know he wasn't an attractive dog!" she said.

"Attractive!" he interrupted. "Why, the little beast's snorts reverberated through the house!"

"But still," she continued, firmly, "I don't think Mr. Benton should have let it drown before his eyes without raising a finger to save it. He stood stock-still on the bank—hesitating; and then it was too late. Of course, I suppose it was a little dangerous." She shrugged a delightful pair of shoulders gracefully. "I don't think most men would have hesitated." She glanced at the Rising Barrister as she spoke, and if he failed to alter the "most men" to his own advantage the fault was certainly not hers. It struck him suddenly that pink gave a most attractive lighting effect.

"Er—perhaps not," he murmured. "Still, I expect he was quite right, you know. One—er—should be very careful what one says in cases of this sort."

Which was why a few minutes later he retailed the story to the Celebrated Actor, over a sherry-and-bitters.

"The faintest tinge of the yellow streak," he said, confidentially. "There was something or other in France—I don't exactly recall it at this moment. I know I heard something."

But the Celebrated Actor flatly refused to agree. "I don't know anything about France," he said, firmly. "I know a lot about that dog. If a suitable occasion arises, I shall publicly propose a vote of thanks to young Benton. Would you believe me, sir, only yes-

terday, when outlining my part in my new play to Lady Vera and one or two others, the little brute bit me in the ankle! True, I had inadvertently trodden on it, but——" He waved a careless hand, as if dismissing such a trifling cause.

From all of which it will be seen what the general feeling in the house was towards Peter Benton on the night in question. And Peter, a very discerning young man, was not slow to realise it. At first it had amused him; after a while he had become annoyed. More or less a stranger in the locality, he had not known the depth of the mill-stream; and he frankly admitted to himself that he had hesitated to go into that black, swirling water, not a stone's throw from the mill itself, in order to save a dog. He had hesitated, and in a second it had been too late. The dog had flashed past him, and he had watched it disappear over the fall by the wheel. It was only later that to him the additional reason of the dog's extreme age and general ill-health presented itself. And the additional reason had not added to his popularity with the animal's mistress.

He quite saw her point of view: he was annoyed because no one apparently saw his. And he was far too proud to attempt any explanation—apart from seeing the futility of it. He could imagine the cold answer—"Doubtless you were perfectly right. Poor little Toots is dead now. Shall we consider the incident closed?"

Savagely he kicked the turf on the lawn outside the window where they were dancing. For three in suc-

cession Sybil had had Captain Seymour as her partner, and Peter had hoped——

"Oh, hang that horrible little dog!" he muttered to himself, striding viciously away into the garden.

A brilliant moon was shining, flooding the country with a cold white light, in which things stood out almost as clearly as by day. Half a mile away an unfinished factory chimney, still with its scaffolding round it, rose sheer and black against the sky. Around it new works were being erected, and for a while Peter stood motionless, gazing at the thin column of bricks and mortar.

Only that morning he had watched men at work on it, with almost a shudder. They looked like so many flies crawling over the flimsy boards, and he had waited while one workman had peered nonchalantly over the edge of his plank and indulged in a wordy warfare with the man below. It seemed that unless the latter mended his ways he would shortly receive a brick on his blinking nut; but it was the complete disregard for their dizzy height that had fascinated Peter. He could imagine few professions which he would less sooner join than that of steeplejack. And yet the funny thing was that on the occasions when he had flown he had not noticed any discomfort at all.

Presumably there was some scientific reason for it —something which would account for the fact that, though he could fly at twenty times the height of St. Paul's without feeling giddy, on the occasion when he had looked over the edge of that great dome from the little platform at the top he had been overcome with a sort of dreadful nausea and had had to go back quickly.

"Why, Peter, what are you doing here all alone?" A voice behind him made him look round.

For a moment the dog episode had gone out of his mind, and, with a quick smile, he took a step towards the speaker. "Why, Sybil," he said, "how topping you look! Isn't it a glorious night?" And then suddenly he remembered, and stopped with a frown.

"Peter," said the girl, quietly, "I want to hear about this afternoon from you, please."

"Haven't you heard all there is to be heard?" he answered, a little bitterly. "Miss Saunderson's dog fell into the mill-stream. I failed to pull it out: to be strictly accurate, I failed to attempt to pull it out. That's all there is to it."

They faced one another in the moonlight, and after a while the girl spoke again. "That's not like you, Peter. Why did you let it drown?"

"Because," said the man, deliberately, "I did not consider I was called on to risk my life to save a dog. Even poor little Toots," he added, cynically.

"Supposing it had been a child, Peter?" said the girl, gravely.

"My God!" answered the man, very low. "As bad as that, is it? Oh, my God!"

"They're saying things, Peter: all these people are saying things."

The man thrust his hands into his pockets, and stared with brooding eyes at the black, lifeless chimney.

"Saying I'm a coward, are they?" He forced the words out. "What do you think, Sybil?"

The girl bit her lip, and suddenly put her hand on

his arm. "Oh, Peter," she whispered, "it wasn't like you—not a bit!"

"You think," he said, dispassionately, "that I should have been justified—more, that I ought to have jumped into the mill-stream in flood to save that dog?"

But the girl made no answer; she only looked miserably at the man's averted face.

"I don't know," she said at length. "I don't know. It's so—so difficult to know what to say."

Gently Peter Benton removed her hand from his arm. "That is quite a good enough answer for me, Sybil." He faced her gravely. "The thing is unfortunate, because I was going to ask you—to-night——" His jaw set and he turned away for a moment. Then he faced her again. "But never mind that now: the situation, as they say in Parliament, does not arise. I would like you, however, to know that I do not think about the matter at all. For one brief second this afternoon I did think about it; for the fraction of a minute I had made up my mind to go in after the dog. And then I realised how utterly unjustifiable such an action would be. Since that moment—as I say—I have not thought about the matter at all."

"And supposing it had been Ruffles?" asked the girl, slowly.

For a while the man hesitated. Then: "My decision would have been the same," he answered, turning on his heel.

II

Inside the house the Celebrated Actor and the Rising Barrister were each proving to their own satisfaction, if not to their partners', that the modern dance held no terrors for them. The two boys were getting warmer and more energetic; Lady Vera, after chatting for a little with the Great Doctor and the Well-known Soldier, had left them to their own devices, and had joined the two elderly ladies on the sofa.

In a corner of the room sat Captain Seymour talking to Madge Saunderson, though, incidentally, she was doing most of the talking; and with them sat the two other girls. Every now and then Seymour frowned uncertainly, and shook his head: the invariable signal for all three girls to lean forward in their most beseeching manner and look adoringly up into his face.

"I wonder," remarked the Doctor, after watching the quartette for a while, "what mischief those girls are plotting?"

The Soldier adjusted his eyeglass and looked across the room. "Probably asking for his autograph," he answered, cynically. "What I want to know is where my teacher has gone to—Miss Sybil."

"I saw her go out into the garden some time ago," said the Doctor. "By Gad, but I'm sorry about this afternoon!"

The Soldier pulled at his cigar. "I am not well versed in the family history," he murmured, "and the connection is a trifle obscure."

"That confounded dog!" answered the Doctor.

"Those two are head over heels in love with one another."

"And you think——?"

"My dear fellow," said the Doctor, "Sybil is one of the dearest girls in the country. I brought her into the world; in many ways she is like my own daughter. But—she is a girl. And if I know anything about the sex, she'd find it easier to forgive him if he'd stolen."

A peal of laughter from the quartette opposite made both men look up. Seymour was nodding his head resignedly, and Madge Saunderson was clapping her hands together with glee.

"Don't forget," her voice came clearly across the room, "we'll pretend it's a bet."

It was at that moment that Sybil appeared in the window, and the Soldier let his eyes dwell on the girl approvingly.

"What a thoroughbred!" he said at length, turning to the Doctor. "I'm not certain it isn't better—as it is."

"Hang it, man!" said the Doctor, irritably. "The boy is a thoroughbred, too. What did you say yourself after dinner about the results having to justify the sacrifice?"

But the Soldier only grunted non-committally. It would doubtless be an excellent thing if theory and practice never clashed.

Sybil came slowly into the room, and Madge Saunderson rose with a meaning glance at Captain Seymour.

"Syb," she cried, "we've got the finest bet on you've ever thought of! I've betted Captain Seymour six

pairs of gloves that he doesn't climb up Mill Down chimney in the moonlight, and he's betted me five hundred of his most special cigarettes that he does."

For a moment a silence settled on the room, which was broken by Lady Vera. "But are you quite sure it's safe, my dear?" she remarked, searching for a dropped stitch. "It might fall down or something."

Miss Saunderson laughed merrily. "Why, Aunt Vera," she cried, "there are men working on it every day. It's quite safe—only I bet he'll have cold feet, and not get to the top—V.C. and all." She flashed a smile at the flying-man. "And it's a ripping evening for a walk."

The Doctor turned to his companion. "I wonder what that young woman's game is?" he remarked, thoughtfully.

"I don't know," answered the Soldier. "I suppose you've got a good head for heights, Seymour?" he called out.

"Pretty fair, sir," replied the airman, with a grin. "I don't mind twenty thousand feet, so I don't think Mill Down chimney should worry me much."

"The two things are not quite alike," said a quiet voice from the window, and everyone turned to see Peter Benton standing there, with his hands in his pockets. "I've got a shocking head for height myself, but I never noticed it when I was flying."

"I think I will chance it," answered Seymour, with a slight drawl, and having recently been supplied with Madge Saunderson's version of the dog accident his tone was understandable.

"Let's all go down and see he doesn't cheat," cried

one of the girls, and there was a general exodus of the younger members of the party for wraps. Only Sybil, with troubled eyes, stood motionless, staring out into the brilliant moonlight; while Peter, lighting a cigarette, picked up an illustrated paper and glanced through it. And to the Doctor, watching the scene with his shrewd grey eyes, the only person in the room who seemed ill at ease was the flying-man himself.

"What would the world be like," he remarked to the Soldier, "if woman lost her power to cause man to make a fool of himself?"

"Good Lord! my dear fellow," said the other, "it's only an after-dinner prank. That boy will do it on his head."

"I dare say he will," returned the Doctor. "But it's cheap, and he knows it." He rose. "Shall we go down and witness the feat?"

"Why not?" answered the Soldier. "It may stop Deering telling us again about his new play."

Half an hour later the whole house-party were grouped round the base of the chimney. Close to, it seemed to have grown in height, till it towered above them into the starlit sky. The girls were chattering gaily, standing around Seymour—except for Sybil, who stood a little apart; while the two Eton boys were busily engaged in deciding on the correct method of ascent. Seated on a pile of bricks sat the four men, more occupied with a never-ending political argument than the performance of climbing the chimney; while in the background, standing by himself, was Peter Benton, with a twisted, bitter smile on his face.

He was under no delusions as to why the bet had been made: just a further episode, thought out by a spiteful girl, to show his conduct that afternoon in a blacker light. On the surface, at any rate, it was more dangerous to the ordinary man to climb this chimney than to go into the mill-stream. And this was being done merely for sport—as a prank; while the other might have saved a dog's life.

With a laugh, Seymour swung himself off the ground, and started to climb. He went up swiftly, without faltering; and after a while even the political discussion ceased, and the party below stared upwards in silence. In the cold white light the climber looked like some gigantic insect, creeping up the brickwork, and gradually as he neared the top the spectators moved farther away from the base of the chimney, in order to see him better. At length he reached the limit of the main scaffolding; only some temporary makeshift work continued for the few feet that separated him from the actual top. He hesitated for a moment, apparently reconnoitring the best route; and Madge Saunderson, cupping her mouth in her hands, shouted up to him:

"Right up, Captain Seymour, or you won't get your cigarettes."

And Seymour looked down.

It would be hard to say the exact moment when the watchers below realised that something was wrong—all, that is, save Madge Saunderson and the other two girls who had been in the quartette.

It was the Doctor who rose suddenly and said, "Heavens! he's lost his head!"

"Don't shout!" said the Soldier, imperatively. "Leave it to me." He looked up, and his voice rang through the night: "Captain Seymour—General Hardcastle speaking. Don't look down. Look up—do you hear me?—look up. At once!" But the face of the aviator still peered down at them, and it almost seemed as if they could see his wide, staring eyes.

"My God!" muttered the Soldier. "What are we going to do?"

"Let's all shout together," said the Actor.

"No good," cried the General. "You'll only confuse him."

And it was then that the quiet voice of Peter Benton was heard. He was talking to Madge Saunderson, who with the other two girls had been whispering together, ignorant that he was close behind them in the shadow.

"Do I understand you to say, Miss Saunderson, that Captain Seymour is only pretending?"

"You had no business to hear what I said, Mr. Benton," she answered, angrily. "I wasn't talking to you."

But the Doctor appeared interested, and very few of either sex had ever hesitated for long when he became serious.

"You will kindly tell me at once whether this is a joke," he said, grimly.

For a moment the girl's eyes flashed mutinously, and then she laughed—a laugh which rang a little false.

"If you wish to know, it is," she answered, defiantly. "I wanted to find out if Mr. Benton would consider a human life worth saving."

She laughed again, as the four men with one accord turned their backs on her.

"Perhaps it would be as well, then," said Peter, calmly, "for you to tell Captain Seymour that the charming little jest has been discovered, and that he can come down again."

She looked at him contemptuously; then, raising her voice, she shouted to the man above: "You can come down, Captain Seymour: they've found out our little joke."

But the aviator remained motionless.

"Come down," she cried again. "Can't you hear me?" But Seymour's face, like a white patch, still peered down, and suddenly a girl started sobbing.

"It would seem," remarked Peter, "that the plot is going to be successful, after all."

The next moment, before anyone realised what was happening, he was climbing steadily up towards the motionless man at the top.

There was only one remark made during that second ascent, and it came from the Doctor.

"You deserve, young woman," he said, quietly, to Madge Saunderson, "to be publicly whipped through the streets of London."

Then silence reigned, broken only by Peter, as he paused every now and then to shout some encouraging remark to the man above.

"I'm coming, Seymour. Absolutely all right. Can't you send for one of your bally machines, and save us both the trouble of climbing down again?"

Between each remark he climbed steadily on, until at last he was within a few feet of the aviator.

"Look away from me, Seymour," he ordered, quietly, gazing straight into the unblinking, staring eyes above. "Look at the brickwork beside you. Do as I tell you, Seymour. Look at the brickwork beside you."

For what seemed an eternity to those below the two men stayed motionless; then a great shuddering sigh broke from them—Seymour was no longer looking down.

It was only the General who spoke, and he was not conscious of doing so. "By Gad! you're right, Doctor," he muttered. "He's thoroughbred right enough—he's thoroughbred."

And the great Doctor, whose iron nerve had earned for him the reputation of being one of the two finest operating surgeons in Europe, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a hand that shook like a leaf.

Then began the descent.

"Look at the brickwork the whole time, Seymour—and hold fast with your hands. Now give me your right foot; give me your right foot, do you hear? That's it—now the left."

Step by step, with Peter just below him, the aviator came down the chimney, and he was still thirty feet from the bottom when the onlookers saw him pause and pass a hand over his forehead. He gazed down at them, and on his face there was a look of dazed surprise—like a man waking from a dream. Then he swung himself rapidly down to the ground, where he stood facing Peter.

"You've saved my life, old man," he said, a little breathlessly, with the wondering look still in his eyes.

"I—don't understand quite what happened. I seemed to go all queer—when I looked down." He laughed shakily. "Dashed funny thing—er—thanks, most awfully. Good Lord! What's the matter, old boy?"

He leant over Peter, who had pitched forward unconscious at his feet.

"I think," remarked the Well-known Soldier to no one in particular, as they walked back, "that the less said about this little episode the better. It was a good deal too near a tragedy for my liking."

"A most instructive case," murmured the Great Doctor, "showing, first of all, the wonderful power of self-hypnotism. I have heard of similar cases in those old-fashioned London houses, where the light in the hall has fascinated people leaning over the banisters two or three storeys above it, and caused them to want to throw themselves over."

"And what is your second observation?" murmured the Rising Barrister, who was always ready to learn.

"The influence of mind over matter," returned the Doctor, briefly, "and the strain involved in the successful overcoming of intense fear. Young Benton has never, and will never, do a braver thing in his life than he did to-night."

"Ah!" murmured the Celebrated Actor, running his hand through his hair. "What a situation! Magnificent! Superb! But, I fear, unstageable."

They entered the drawing-room, to find the conversation being monopolised by a newcomer—a captain in the Coldstream. It was perhaps as well: the re-

mainder of the party seemed singularly indisposed to talk.

"Climbin' chimneys? Might be in you flying wallahs' line—but not old Peter. D'you remember, Peter, turnin' pea-green that time we climbed half-way up Wipers Cathedral, before they flattened it?" The Guardsman laughed at the recollection. "No—swimming is his stunt," he continued to everyone at large. "How he ever had the nerve to go overboard—in the most appalling sea—and rescue that fellow, I dunno. It was a great effort that, Peter."

But the only answer was the door closing.

"A good swimmer, is he?" remarked the Great Doctor, casually.

"Wonderful," answered the other. "The rougher it is the more he likes it. He got the Royal Humane Society's medal, you know, for that thing I was talking about. Leave-boat—off Boulogne."

He rattled on, but no one seemed to be paying very much attention. In fact, the only other remark of interest was made by the Rising Barrister, just as the door closed once again—this time behind Sybil.

"That was what I remember hearing about in France," he said, calmly, to the Great Doctor. "You remember I was mentioning it to you before dinner. I knew there was something."

"Wonderful!" murmured the Actor. "Quite wonderful!"

The Rising Barrister coughed deprecatingly, and lit a cigarette.

VIII

"GOOD HUNTING, OLD CHAP"

I

THE Well-known Soldier leaned back in his chair, and thoughtfully held his glass up to the light.

"Personally," he remarked at length, "I would sooner be sent to prison for five years for a thing I had done than be let out after two and a half for a thing I hadn't."

"An interesting point," conceded the Celebrated Actor. "But to the casual observer, unversed in psychology, it might appear to be merely a choice between five years of hell and two and a half."

The Celebrated Actor, it may be stated, had recently been dipping into various "ologies" in the course of studying his newest and greatest part. Luckily for the sake of the public, the leaves of most of the treatises were still uncut, which ensured that his rendering of the strong, silent Napoleon of finance would not differ appreciably from his own celebrated personality. Incidentally he had never intended that it should, but the author of the play was a serious young man, and the Actor was nothing if not tactful.

"I am inclined to disagree, General," said the Eminent Divine. "Surely the moral support of a clear conscience——"

"Quite," murmured the Actor. "Quite."

"Would cut no ice, Bishop," declared the Soldier. "Two and a half years is too long a time for such a comparatively frail support as a clear conscience. Especially a youngster's."

"Exactly," agreed the Actor. "Exactly. Two and a half years of hell for something one has not done. . . . Appalling—quite appalling." With great care he continued the delicate process of peeling a walnut.

But the Bishop was not convinced. "All the time he would know that a mistake had been made; that sooner or later he would be cleared in the eyes of the world. Whereas if he was guilty he would know that no such chance existed, and that when he came out from prison he would be an outcast—a jail-bird."

The Soldier shook his head and drained his glass. "Right in theory, Bishop; right in practice, too, if the clearing had been quicker. But two and a half years is too long. Hope would die: a youngster would grow bitter."

"Where is he now?" demanded the Celebrated Actor, sweeping back his hair with the gesture for which he was rightly famous.

"No one knows," said the Soldier, quietly. "He came out a week ago. His brother met him at the prison gates, but Hugh gave him the slip. And since then he's hidden himself. Of course, he could be traced, but his father is wise, I think, in not doing so."

The Bishop nodded. "He will find himself in time; and it's best to leave him alone till he does. A good boy, too."

For a while the three men were silent, while the soft

summer breeze played gently through the old-fashioned garden outside, and the wonderful scent of the laburnum came fragrant through the open windows.

"I forget exactly what happened," remarked the Actor at length. "I was producing 'King Lear' at the time, I remember, and——" He glanced inquiringly at the General.

"A fairly common story," returned the Soldier, lighting a cigarette thoughtfully. "The boy had been an ass and owed a lot of money to some bookmaker. Then he plunged on the Derby—the year Signorinetta won at a hundred to one—and went down, like most of us did. Two days afterwards a couple of thousand in cash was missing. Also the books were falsified over a long period. Everything pointed to him, and they found him guilty, though he protested his innocence all through. A month ago the real thief confessed—two and a half years too late."

The General shrugged his shoulders, and then suddenly sat motionless, staring with narrowed eyes into the darkness outside.

"Quaint how one's eyes deceive one at night." He sat back again in his chair. "For a moment I thought I saw someone moving by the edge of the lawn."

"And your niece?" pursued the Actor. "Weren't they engaged or something?"

"Yes. It almost broke Beryl's heart. You know, of course, the dog was his?"

"I did not," said the Actor. "Ah! that accounts, of course, for her terrible grief."

"If I had my way," snarled the General, fiercely, "I'd flog that young swine Parker to within an inch of his

worthless life. And then I'd put a trap on his own leg."

The Actor nodded. "I agree, General. Personally I am no great dog-lover. They have a way of concealing themselves about the furniture which is most disconcerting should one inadvertently sit upon them. But a trap——"

He shuddered, and poured himself out some more port.

"If only we could get hold of the boy," mused the General, returning to his original theme. "I can guess what he's feeling, and the longer he goes on without the human touch, the harder and more bitter he'll become. He wants to be made to shake hands with reality again; to hit something, if you like—but to get it over. He's bottling it up—I know it: and it's a bad thing for a youngster to bottle up bitterness."

The Soldier rose and strolled over to the window. For a while he leaned against the open frame, smoking quietly, and hardly conscious of the argument which had started in the room behind him. The power of the stage as a pulpit was an evergreen with the Celebrated Actor, and he felt in no mood for a discussion on the matter. The youngster, Hugh Dawnay, was filling his mind, and also Tommy, that morning.

He'd helped the vet. put the little terrier under, with a dose of prussic acid, and after it was over the two men had stared at one another, and then looked away, as is the manner of men who are feeling deeply.

"I hate it, more and more each time," said the vet., gruffly. "Poor little chap!"

"It's worse than a man," snapped the General. "A

dog trusts a fellow so—so infernally. Damn that young Parker!"

With which explosion he had blown his nose loudly and stalked off for a long walk.

At length he pitched his cigarette away and turned back into the room. And at that moment, very clear and distinct from somewhere in the garden, there came a low whistle.

"Hush! you fellows, listen!" The argument ceased at his abrupt words, and the two men stared at him, as he stood motionless half-way between the table and the window. "Did you hear that whistle?"

"Personally, I did not," remarked the Actor, "but at the moment I was engrossed in other matters. A vulgar habit—whistling—but not, I regret to say, uncommon."

"There's someone in the garden," said the General. "I thought I saw something move earlier, and just then I heard a whistle most distinctly."

"My dear man," said the Actor, with a beneficent wave of his shapely hand, "are there not maid-servants in the house? I fear that soldiering destroys romance."

The Soldier grunted. "Perhaps you're right. My mind was busy with other things. I think I'll take a stroll outside, too, for a bit. Give me a hail when you've finished your discussion."

He moved once more towards the window, only to pause on the threshold.

"Why, Hugh, my dear lad," he said, quietly, "it's good to see you again. Come in."

And the Celebrated Actor and the Eminent Divine, looking up quickly at his words, saw a man standing

outside on the path, whose face was the face of one into whose soul the iron had entered.

For a moment or two Hugh Dawnay hesitated. Then, with the faintest perceptible shrug of his shoulders, he stepped into the room. He glanced at each man in turn; then his eyes came back to the Soldier's face and rested there.

"Good evening, General." His voice was quite expressionless. "I must apologise for intruding like this."

"Apologise!" The Soldier smiled at him. "What the devil is there to apologise about? I'm just amazingly glad to see you. Do you know the Bishop of Sussex and Mr. Trayne?"

"I had the pleasure of seeing you act, Mr. Trayne, just before I was so kindly accommodated at His Majesty's expense." Hugh's voice was as expressionless as ever. "I suppose you are still charming London with your art?"

For the first time in his life the Celebrated Actor felt at a loss. Had some charming woman made the remark to him—and many had—he would have known his cue. A deprecating wave of his hands—a half-hearted denial—a delicately turned compliment; it was all too easy. But as he stared at the boy on the other side of the table—the boy with the tired face of a man—the cloak of mannerisms which he had worn successfully for twenty years slipped off, and the soul of the great artist—and he was that, for all his artificiality—showed in his eyes. More clearly, perhaps, than either of the other two, he realised the dreadful laughter which was shaking the boy's soul; realised the bitter

cynicism behind the ordinary words. More clearly than they could he saw himself, he saw the room, he saw life through the eyes of Hugh Dawnay.

"I still strut my small part," he said, gravely. "I still win a little brief applause. And if I can help those who see me to forget the bitterness and sorrow of the day, even though it be only for a while, it is enough." He rose, and laid both his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Forgive an old mummer's presumption, my lad. Don't think me an impertinent fool prating of what I do not know and cannot understand. You have been in the depths. God knows how deep and bitter they have been—God and you—unjustly, unfairly—I know that. And to you at the moment we seem typical of the smug respectability which pushed you there. Vain words of regret—empty phrases of sorrow, cannot give you back your two and a half wasted years any more than my playing alters the realities of the past. But maybe the hour or two of forgetfulness helps a man to face the realities of the future. Will you not try to forget, too?"

"And what play will you stage for me, Mr. Trayne," answered Hugh, quietly, "which will help me to forget? Will you cast me for the principal part, or am I to be one of the audience?"

The boy threw back his head and laughed silently. "Two and a half years of the same soul-killing monotony. Why, I became an expert at talking to the man next to me, who was a 'lifer.' They couldn't prove he'd actually intended to murder the girl, and his counsel successfully pleaded drink. A charming fellow." Once again he laughed; then, with a quick movement,

he thrust his hands in his pockets and, stepping back towards the window, faced the three men for a while in silence.

"For a moment or two you must listen to me," he said, and there was a harsh, commanding ring in his voice. "Each of you is old enough to be my father in years; I am older than all of you combined in reality. At least, that is how I feel just now. You, Mr. Trayne, have talked about forgetfulness; in time, perhaps, I shall forget. But there's something inside me at the present moment which is numbing me. I can't feel, I can't think, I can't hate—I'm simply apathetic. I don't want to have anything to do with men; I want to get right away from them. And I'm going—I'm going; but I'm not going alone." He swung round and faced the Soldier. "Do you know why I've come here to-night, General?"

The Soldier looked at him quietly. "To see Beryl? Because she'd like to see you, Hugh."

But Hugh Dawnay shook his head. "No, not to see Beryl. I'm not fit to see her—yet. Perhaps in a year or two—if she isn't—married by then. No, it's not to see any human being; not even her. It's to get Tommy; and take him with me out into the big spaces where, perhaps, in time one may see things differently."

Unconscious of the effect of his words on his listeners, he had turned and was staring into the soft summer night.

"All the time that I've been in prison"—and his voice had lost its harshness—"I've thought of that little chap. I've sat on my stool in the cell, and I've felt his cold, wet muzzle thrust into my hand: I've seen his

eyes—those great brown eyes—staring up at me, asking for a hunt. But there's no hunting in prison—no rabbits: and I used to promise him that when I came out we'd go off together, just he and I—on to the moors somewhere—and be alone. He wouldn't mind even if I'd done it—even if I had stolen the money. That's the wonder of a dog: where he's so infinitely better than a man." The boy gave a little sigh, and for the first time a genuine smile flickered round his lips. "I've been all round the house, whistling and looking for him—but I expect he's in the drawing-room somewhere. With Beryl, perhaps. I wonder, General, if you'd get him for me?"

He glanced at the Soldier, and slowly his eyes dilated, as he saw the look on the older man's face. He glanced at the Bishop, who was staring at the cloth; he glanced at the Actor, who was staring at the Bishop, and suddenly he gave a little choking cry.

"My God!" he muttered, brokenly, "don't tell me that! Don't say that Tommy is—dead!"

It was the Soldier who answered, and his voice was suspiciously gruff.

"The little fellow was mauled in a trap this morning, old chap: and we had—to put him out of the way."

"Mauled in a trap?" The boy's voice was dead. "Tommy mauled in a trap? Who laid the trap?"

And it was the Actor who sat up, with a sudden light in his eyes, and supplied the information.

"Young Parker, who is farming the bit of ground next to here," he said, with almost unnecessary distinctness. "You can see his house through the trees."

"Young Parker! I remember young Parker." Covertly the Celebrated Actor watched the boy's face, and what he saw there seemed to afford him satisfaction.

"Where is the little dog buried?" asked the boy, quietly.

"Underneath the old yew tree," said the General. "Beryl put a ring of stones around his grave this afternoon."

"I see," said the boy. "Thank you. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

The next instant he was gone, and it was the Actor who stopped the Soldier as he was on the point of going after him.

"The boy has got his part," he remarked, cryptically. "At present he requires no prompting."

"What the deuce are you talking about?" demanded the General, irritably.

But the Celebrated Actor was himself once more.

"Leave it to me, my dear fellow," he murmured, magnificently, throwing back his head in another of those famous gestures which were the pride and delight of countless multitudes. "Leave it entirely to me. The stage is set: very soon the curtain will ring up." He stalked to the window, and stood for a moment on the path outside, while the other two looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders.

"Can't feel, can't think, can't hate. That boy feels and thinks and hates—hates, I tell you, at this moment."

With which Parthian shot the Celebrated Actor vanished into the night.

"What on earth is the fellow driving at?" said the Soldier, peevishly.

But the answer to that question was apparently beyond the scope of the Eminent Divine, and in silence the two men listened to the scrunch of the Actor's footsteps on the gravel growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

II

Half an hour later they were still sitting at the table. The Actor had not returned: there had been no further sign of Hugh, and the inaction was getting on the Soldier's nerves. Twice had he risen and gone to the window: twice had he taken a few steps into the darkness outside, only to return and hover undecidedly by the fireplace.

"I feel I ought to go and look for the boy," he remarked for the twentieth time. "Trayne's such an ass."

And for the twentieth time the Bishop counselled patience.

"In some ways he is," he agreed: "in others he's very shrewd. He's got more imagination, General, than both of us put together, and real imagination is akin to genius. Leave him alone: he can't do any harm."

With a non-committal grunt, the Soldier sat down, only to rise again immediately as a tall, slight girl in white came in through the open window. There was a misty look in her eyes, and her lips were faintly tremulous, but she came straight up to the General and put a

hand on his arm. The other hand, with a piece of paper clutched in it, she held behind her back.

"Hugh has come back, Uncle Jim," she said. "Did you know?"

"Yes, old lady, I knew. Have you seen him?"

"No, I haven't seen him. Did he—did he come for Tommy?"

The General nodded. "Yes. And I told him what had happened."

For a moment the girl's lips quivered. "Poor old Hugh!"

Very gently the Soldier stroked the girl's hair. "We must give him time, Beryl. He's—he's not quite himself yet. By the way," he added, struck by a sudden thought, "if you haven't seen him, how do you know he's come back?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears. "I went out to Tommy's grave again—I wanted to see that the little fellow was comfortable, and—and—I found this."

She held out the scrap of paper to the Soldier, and then broke down uncontrollably. And the man, having glanced at it, coughed with unnecessary violence and handed it to the Eminent Divine.

"It was just like him—just like Hugh," sobbed the girl. "And Tommy—why, what more would Tommy want?" She picked up the paper and stared at it through her tears. " 'Good hunting, old chap.—H. D.' Good hunting. He's got a soul—I know he has. He's having the most glorious chase after bunnies now —somewhere—somewhere else. Isn't he?"

She turned appealingly to the Bishop, but that eminent Pillar of the Church was engrossed in the study

of a very ordinary print, and from the assiduous manner he was polishing his glasses he seemed to be having difficulties with his eyesight.

And it was thus a moment or two later that the Celebrated Actor found them.

"Successful." He barked the word grandiloquently from the window. "Utterly and completely successful. The curtain is shortly going up: it would be well if the audience took their seats as silently as possible."

"What do you mean, Mr. Trayne?" The girl was staring at him in amazement through her tears.

"A very human play, my dear young lady, is on the point of being acted. As producer, general manager, and box office combined, I beg to state that there will be only one performance. The financial receipts will be *nil:* the moral receipts will be a soul regained. And who shall say that it is not a more tangible asset?" For a while he stared magnificently at nothing, with one hand thrust carelessly out—that attitude which had long caused infatuated denizens of the pit to stand for hours in dreadful draughts lest they should fail to secure the front row. Then he returned with an effort to things mundane. "Follow me," he ordered, "and do not talk or make a noise."

"Where's the boy, Trayne?" demanded the General, almost angrily. In his own vernacular, he was feeling rattled.

"You shall see in good time. Come."

It was a strange procession which might have been seen wending its way through the darkness a little later. First came the Celebrated Actor—supremely happy, as befits the great showman who has the goods to offer.

Then, a few steps behind him, was the Well-known Soldier, periodically muttering under his breath, and with the girl's hand on his arm. Behind them again trotted the Eminent Divine, unable to see very well in the dark, and continually stubbing his toes on various obstructions in the ground.

"Where is he taking us to?" whispered the girl to her uncle.

"Heaven knows, my dear!" he answered, irritably. "The man's an ass, as I've said before."

"But what did he mean about the very human play?" she persisted. "And the soul regained?"

Before the Soldier could answer, the guide turned, and holding up his hand demanded silence.

"We approach the stage," he declaimed. "Silence is essential."

He led the way between some trees, and finally halted behind a clump of low bushes.

"Personally," he whispered, "I am a man of peace, but it struck me from my rudimentary knowledge of pugilism that the clearing in front was ideally suited to that brutal form of amusement. And when I suggested it to Hugh, he quite agreed."

"You suggested it to Hugh!" said the Soldier, slowly, and gradually a look of comprehension began to dawn in his eyes. "Why, Actor-man, Actor-man, I retract every thought I've had about you to-night."

He peered cautiously through the bushes, and a slow smile spread over his face.

"Tell me, Actor-man," he whispered, "how did you get the other?"

"I howled such insults as I could think of in my poor way through the window."

Then he, too, cautiously peered over the top of the bush. "What think you of my show, Soldier-man?"

"It is altogether beautiful and lovely to regard," replied the other. "Can the Church see?"

And, behold, the Church was lying on its stomach to get a better view.

The moonlight shone down, clear and bright, on the little glade in front. At the back of it, in the trees, stood young Parker's house, but young Parker himself, with an ugly sneer on his face, was engaged in removing his coat. Facing him stood Hugh Dawnay, and in the cold white light his eyes shone hard and merciless.

"So you want me to thrash you as well as stop your damned dog poaching," laughed young Parker. "All right, you bally jail-bird, come on!"

He rushed in as he spoke and his fist shot out as he closed. The fight had started, and from that moment no one of the fascinated audience spoke or moved. Parker was the heavier of the two, but the boy was the better boxer. In fact, in the strict sense of the word, the young farmer was not a boxer at all—but he was fit and he was strong. And had it not been for the two and a half years' hard manual labour which the other had gone through, the issue in all probability would have been different.

As it was they fought all out for five minutes, and then young Parker grew wild. He became flurried—tried rushing—his fists whirling like flails. And the more flurried he grew, the more cool and collected be-

came the boy. And then came the end. A right-arm jolt below his heart brought the farmer's head forward, a left upper-cut under the jaw laid him out. For a while the spectators watched him moaning on the ground, while the Church wriggled ecstatically under its sheltering bush.

"Had enough, you swine?" asked the boy, quietly.

The prostrate figure mumbled something.

"Get up and swear to me that you will never again lay a trap in that part of your land. Get a move on!" he snarled.

"All right." The farmer shambled to his feet, watching him sullenly. "I swear."

"Now go down on your knees and apologise for calling me a jail-bird. Hurry up, you filthy scum! On your knees, I said."

And as young Parker went on his knees, according to order, the girl, her eyes shining like stars, clapped her hands softly together.

"Quick!" said the Celebrated Actor, authoritatively. "Back to the house, you people. The play is over and my estimate of the receipts is, I think, correct."

Stealthily as it had come, the procession moved back to the house. At intervals, the Eminent Divine was observed to jolt with his right, following it up with a smashing left upper-cut into space, what time he chuckled consumedly. And even a slight error as to distance, which caused him far more pain than the tree which he unfortunately smote, failed to damp his spirits. The Soldier walked with a spring in his step, the Actor hummed gently under his breath, and it was only as they reached the open window of the dining-room

that they realised that the girl had slipped away in the darkness and was not with them.

"Where is Beryl?" said the General, pausing on the path.

"Heaven help the man!" fumed the Actor, addressing space. "His past career, we understand, is comparatively distinguished from a military point of view. But"—and he turned accusingly to the Soldier—"you must have driven every woman you ever met completely off her chump."

"Chump," chuckled the Bishop, feinting with his right and gently upper-cutting the Celebrated Actor's celebrated chin. "What is chump, you old sinner?"

But the Well-known Soldier only smiled—a trifle sadly. "She's all I've got, old chap, and her happiness is mine."

"She is happy now," remarked the Actor, quietly. "The boy's all right."

For a while the three men were silent, each busy with his own thoughts. And then over the General's face a grin began to spread.

"Tell me, you charmer of foolish women," he demanded, "how did you manage it?"

"Your vulgar gibe leaves me unmoved," returned the Actor, calmly. "To-night is merely a proof of how brains and imagination control every situation. I hope you both appreciate my inference."

"Go on," chuckled the General. "The Church and the Army hide their diminished heads."

"What better destroyer of apathy is there than scrapping with someone, whom in less civilised and more primitive days one would have killed? I followed

him. I suggested it to him—I even went so far as to assist him in his search for a suitable spot on which to do it. And then"—he paused magnificently—"I drew the badger. I bolted the fox. I extracted young Parker."

"How?" murmured the Church.

"I hit him first on the head with an over-ripe pear, which I threw through the window. A wonderful shot—not once in a hundred times would I do it again. And as he jumped up from the table where he was sitting, I spoke to him from my heart."

"Yes," grinned the Soldier. "And what did you say?"

"I said, 'You dirty louse—you maimer of little dogs—come out and fight, unless you're a coward as well as a swine.' Then," murmured the Actor, "I ran as fast as I could, for fear he might mistake his opponent and start on me."

For a space there was silence, while the Army and the Church shook hopelessly, and the Stage impressively lit a cigar. And it was as he deposited the match in an ash-tray on the table that he saw the piece of paper lying in front of him. He read what was written on it, and then he turned slowly and looked at the other two.

"So that's what he was doing under the yew tree," he said, softly. "Dear lad! Why, yes, he's a dear lad."

"Of course he is," returned the Soldier, gruffly. "What the devil did you think?"

It was under the yew tree that the boy and the girl

met. She was kneeling there, her frock gleaming white in the moonlight as Hugh came through the trees, and for a time he watched her without speaking. Two and a half years—more—since he had seen her, and now it seemed to him that she was more lovely than ever. His eyes took in every detail of her, as she bent forward and laid both her hands on the little grave, and, suddenly, with a great wave of wonder, he realised that all the bitterness had gone from his soul. The past was blotted out—sponged from the slate; he was alive again, and the present—why, the present held out beckoning hands of welcome.

"Beryl," he whispered, very low, but not so low that she failed to hear him.

"Why, Hugh, dear," she answered, "I was afraid you'd go away without seeing me."

"I should, if—Tommy had been alive."

He knelt beside her, and together they rearranged two or three of the stones.

"I put a bit of paper here," he said, after a moment.

"I found it," she answered. "That's how I knew you were here—first. Oh! Hugh"—almost unconsciously she found herself in his arms—"poor little chap! And I'd been telling him all last week he'd be seeing you soon."

"You darling!" The boy's voice was husky. "He knows—Tommy knows."

And so for a while they clung together, while the scent of the summer flowers drifting idly by mingled with the scent of her hair.

"If he'd been here, Beryl, I was going to take him," he said, at last. "I was bitter—dear heavens! but I

was bitter. I felt I didn't even want to see you. We were going hunting together—just he and I—out in the wilds."

"And now, boy," whispered the girl, "are you bitter any more?"

"No," he answered, wonderingly, "I'm not. Because, Beryl, because I've thrashed that swine who killed him. Something seemed to snap in me as he went down and out, and I was conscious of a sort of marvellous happiness."

"I know," she said, laughing a little and crying a little, as a girl will do. "I know, dear boy. I saw you do it."

"You saw me thrash him!" he said, amazed. "But how? I don't understand."

"We all did!" she cried. "Uncle Jim and the Bishop and Mr. Trayne and me. Mr. Trayne came back and told us to come."

"I see," said the boy, slowly. "I see. I think I'll go and thank Mr. Trayne."

But there are other things in this world more important even than a debt of gratitude to the most celebrated of actors, and half an hour later the boy and the girl were still pacing slowly up and down the lawn. There were so many things to be discussed—so many glorious plans to be made for the future—the future out of which the blackness had vanished so completely. And it was with almost a feeling of reproach that the girl suddenly turned to him.

"Why, boy!" she cried, "we've forgotten Tommy."

"Tommy!" he said. "Why, so we have." He stared at her for a while, and there was a little quizzical

smile on his lips. "It's funny, isn't it?" he went on, slowly, "that the greatest thing the little chap has ever done for me he has done by his death." He took her in his arms and held her very close. "If he'd lived, it might have all come right—in time; but now——"

And Hugh Dawnay finished his sentence in the only way such sentences can be finished.

"Come in, you two youngsters."

The General's voice came cheerfully from the dining-room, and arm-in-arm they walked towards the open window.

Half-way there they paused, and instinctively their eyes turned towards the old yew tree.

"Why, there he is, boy," breathed the girl. "Don't you see him, and the black mark on his neck and his tail wagging?"

"It's the shadows, darling," answered the boy. "The moonlight through the trees."

Maybe, maybe. Who knows?

Gently he led her on, and she passed into the room ahead of him. And from the path outside there rose once again into the soft summer night the farewell message of a friend to a friend:

"Good hunting, old chap."

IX

THE MAN WITH HIS HAND IN HIS POCKET

I

I'LL take one card."

With the expressionless face of the born gambler, the man glanced at his draw, and laid the five cards face downwards on the table in front of him. Not a muscle twitched as he leaned back in his chair, his right hand thrust deep in his trouser-pocket. So had he played all through the evening, losing with steady persistence and losing highly; losing, in fact, as only a man can lose who is holding good cards at poker when somebody else is holding a little better. And now he had drawn one card to three of a kind, and it had come off. There were four eights in the hand in front of him, and they had made their appearance just in time. For Billy Merton knew only too well that the chips by his side represented everything that was left out of a matter of twenty thousand pounds. The play was high at the Ultima Thule Club in Bond Street.

A fat man opposite him had also taken one card, and Merton's keen eye noticed the twitching of his fingers as he laid his cards down. A bad gambler, but having a run of the most infernal luck, this fat fellow. So much the better: he'd probably got a straight at least

—possibly a full house. Fours could be ruled out: the fat man was the type who would always discard two if he held three of a kind.

They were playing without a limit, and at length Billy Merton leaned across the table.

"My chips are finished, I'm afraid," he remarked, with a faint drawl. "Will you take paper till the end of the hand?"

"Certainly," said the fat man, in a voice which shook a little.

"Good!" With his left hand Merton scrawled an I O U, quite regardless of the spectators who had collected at the rumour of big play which flies round with such mysterious rapidity. He might have been playing halfpenny nap for all the interest he apparently took in the game.

The fat man saw him at five thousand pounds—which was just four thousand more than Billy Merton possessed in the world. And the fat man laid down a straight flush.

"You're lucky, sir," said Merton, with a genial smile, lighting a cigarette with a perfectly steady hand. "I'll just cash a cheque and get you the chips."

A faint murmur of admiration passed round the onlookers: this clean-shaven, steady-eyed man with the whimsical smile was a gambler after their own hearts. Then in a couple of minutes he was forgotten: players at the Ultima Thule are, in the main, a selfish brand of individual. Possibly had they suspected the utter hopelessness seething behind the impassive face of the man who stood by the buffet eating a caviare sandwich and drinking a glass of champagne, they might not

have forgotten him so quickly. But they did not suspect: Billy Merton saw to that. It was only as he turned to help himself to another sandwich that a look of despair came into his eyes. No one could see: the mask could slip for a moment. Ahead lay ruin and disgrace. The cheque could not be met next morning: there was no human possibility of raising the money in the time. And to the descendant of a long race of gamblers there was something peculiarly abhorrent in failing over a debt of honour.

"Bad luck—that last hand of yours, sir." A thick-set, middle-aged man beside him was making a careful study of the various edibles. "Just came up in time to see the show-down."

"I have known the cards run better," answered Merton, curtly.

"I can see that you're a born gambler," continued the man, "and being one myself—though not in this particular line—one has, if one may say so, a sort of fellow-feeling." He was munching a sandwich and staring round the room as he spoke. "The nerve, sir—the nerve required to stake everything on the turn of a card—on the rise or fall of a market—by Heaven, it's the only thing in life!"

Almost against his will—for he was in no mood for talking—Billy Merton smiled.

"Your game is the Stock Exchange, is it?"

"It is, sir—and there's no game like it in the world. Even when ruin stares you in the face, you've still got till next settling day. You've still got a chance."

"I wish the same thing applied here," said Merton, with a hard laugh.

"As bad as that, is it?" remarked the other, sympathetically. "Never mind: the luck will change. I guess there have been times when I've felt like stealing or forging or doing any other blamed thing under the sun to put my hand on some ready money."

Merton smiled mirthlessly, and said nothing. The point of view coincided rather too unpleasantly with his own.

"And mark you, sir," continued the stranger, dogmatically. "I've got a greater respect for a man who wins through, by fair means if possible—but, if not, by foul—than for the weakling who goes down and out. The first, at any rate, is a *man*."

Again Merton smiled. "Leaving out the ethical side of your contention, sir," he remarked, "there are one or two small practical difficulties that occur to one's mind. It is sometimes as difficult to find the foul means as it is to find the fair. Burglary and forging rank high amongst the arts, I believe, which are not taught at most of the public schools."

The other man shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "Of course you mustn't take me too literally. But"—he thumped an enormous fist into the open palm of his other hand—"there's always a way, sir, if you've got the nerve to take it. Nerve: that's the only thing that counts in this world. Without it—why, you can go and grow tomatoes in the country! Nerve, and the capability of seizing the right moment. With those two assets you come to the top and you stay there." For a moment or two he stared fixedly at the half-averted face of the younger man; then he gave a jovial laugh. "Anyway—if you start to recoup your for-

tunes with journalism—you needn't give those as the opinions of Paul Harker. Not that they aren't pretty widely known, but in this world one must pretend."

Merton glanced at the speaker. So this was the celebrated Paul Harker, was it? What the devil was it he'd overheard at the club that afternoon about him? Not knowing him, at the time it had made no impression; now he recalled it hazily. Something to do with a woman. He frowned slightly as he tried to remember; then he gave a short laugh. What on earth did it matter? What did anything matter except that cursed cheque?

"Well, I'll say good-night, Mr. Harker." He put down his empty glass. "It would take a mighty big journalistic scoop to put me straight—bigger even than your ideas on life."

"Which way are you going?"

"Half-Moon Street. I've got rooms there."

"I'll stroll with you. The atmosphere of this place is fierce."

In silence the two men got their coats and strolled into Bond Street. The theatres were just over, and a stream of cars were pouring westward with their loads of well-dressed, wealthy occupants. Life—life in London—for people with money! With a cynical smile Billy Merton lit a cigarette. It was what he had promised himself after years in the wilds.

He barely heard his companion's occasional remarks: it was just as they turned into Half-Moon Street that it struck Billy that Paul Harker had made some suggestion and was waiting for an answer.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Harker," he said, apolo-

getically, "but I'm afraid my mind was wandering. You were saying——"

"I was suggesting that if you've got nothing better to do you should come to my house in Curzon Street. My wife has a spiritualistic séance on. Starts at midnight. Come in and see the fun."

For a moment Billy hesitated. After all, why not? Anything was better than a solitary contemplation of his own confounded foolishness.

"It's very good of you—" he began, but the other cut him short.

"Not at all. Only too pleased you can manage it."

"But won't your wife—— I mean, I'm a complete stranger." He paused doubtfully by the door of his rooms.

"My wife won't mind," answered Paul Harker, taking him by the arm. "Do you good, my dear fellow. Take your mind off."

It was really deuced good of this fellow Harker. Sympathy of a gambler for a gambler sort of idea. He could only hope that Mrs. Harker would see eye to eye with her husband.

"Here is the house, Mr. Merton. Come in." With a smile of welcome Paul Harker stood aside to let the younger man pass.

"I didn't know you knew my name, Mr. Harker," said Billy Merton, as a footman relieved him of his coat.

"I asked who you were at the Ultima Thule. Come on up and meet my wife." Then, in a hoarse undertone just before they reached the room, he turned to

Merton. "I don't know whether you believe in this stuff; but, for Heaven's sake, pretend to."

He gave a heavy wink, and Billy smiled. Undoubtedly Paul Harker was quite a pleasant fellow.

II

There were six women in the room when they entered and one somewhat anæmic-looking man.

"Hope I'm not late, my dear," said Paul Harker, breezily, to a pale, delicate-looking woman who rose to meet them. "I've brought a friend who is interested in these things. Mr. Merton—my wife."

Billy Merton bowed, and took a chair beside her.

"We hope for some very interesting results to-night, Mr. Merton," she remarked. "Professor Granger feels confident of getting a tangible materialisation."

"Indeed!"

Mindful of his host's injunction, he nodded portentously. His ideas on what a tangible materialisation was were of the vaguest: if it was anything like Professor Granger, he inwardly trusted the experiment would fail.

For a few minutes they continued to talk generalities: then Mrs. Harker rose and crossed to the Professor, leaving Merton to his own devices. With some interest he glanced round the room. Heavy black curtains hung over the windows and the door. The furniture was reduced to a minimum, the whole of the centre of the floor being empty. Around the walls were ranged easy chairs draped in some dark material: the carpet, thick and luxurious, was dark also. In fact, the whole room was sombre—sombre and silent.

Curiously he glanced at his companions. In one corner four of the women were talking in low, restrained tones, evidently impressed with the solemnity of the occasion, and involuntarily Merton smiled. They seemed so very earnest—and so very dull. Then he looked at the other woman who was standing by Paul Harker. She seemed of a different type—very far from being dull. Tall and perfectly proportioned, she was dressed in black, and as his eyes rested idly on the pair it struck him that his host found her far from dull also. And at that moment they both turned and looked at him.

It was the first time he had seen the woman's face, and he found himself staring foolishly at her. She was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen —beautiful in a sensuous Eastern fashion—and Billy Merton suddenly realised that he was gaping at her like a callow schoolboy. Abruptly he looked away, annoyed with himself at his *gaucherie,* to find that he was not the only person who was interested in the lady. For his hostess, though ostensibly speaking to the Professor, was watching her husband's companion with a look on her face which left no doubt as to her feelings on the subject.

"So that's how the land lies, is it?" thought Merton; and the remark he had overheard at the club came back to him. He knew there had been a woman in it.

"Iris, I want you to meet Mr. Merton." His host's voice made him look up quickly. "Let me introduce you to Miss Sala."

Merton rose and bowed: on the instant the remark had returned to his memory.

"There will be a crash soon," a man had said, "with Harker and that Sala girl."

And now he was talking to the Sala girl, and deciding that if she was beautiful at a distance she was ten times more beautiful close to.

"No," he found himself saying, "I've not done much of this sort of thing in England, though I've seen a good deal of what the African native calls *ju-ju*."

"And it interests you?" Her voice was deep and very sweet.

"Very much," said Merton. "I'm most curious to see what is going to happen to-night."

For a moment the smile seemed to ripple over the surface of her eyes: then once more they were inscrutable.

"It's rather exciting if it comes off," she remarked, thoughtfully. "Everything is pitch-dark, of course, and then you hear sighs and groans, and sometimes a hand comes out and touches you."

"But do you really believe—" began Merton, incredulously.

"I don't believe—I know," said the girl, calmly. "Why, at one séance I attended a jade necklace I was wearing was wrenched off my neck. The fastening was broken, and all the beads rolled about the floor. And everyone had been bound in their chairs, Mr. Merton, before we started."

Billy nodded discreetly: it occurred to him that he had heard stories like that before.

"You hear something moving round the room," she continued, "something you know was not there at the beginning—and won't be there at the end. And some-

times it bumps against you, and then it goes on floundering and moving about the room. It sounds like a sack of potatoes, being dragged about at times, and then it changes and you hear soft footfalls."

Again Billy nodded: he was prepared to listen indefinitely to this sort of stuff when the speaker was Iris Sala.

"It sounds more than rather exciting," he said, with a grin. "Let's hope we get the jolly old flounderer tonight."

For the moment his own trouble was forgotten: he was only conscious of a pleasurable sense of excitement. Not that he really believed in what the girl had said, any more than the average normal person believes in a haunted house. But even the most pronounced sceptic is conscious of a little thrill when he turns out the light in the bedroom which is popularly reputed to be the family ghost's special hunting-ground.

"I think it's very foolish of Mrs. Harker to wear those lovely pearls of hers." The girl was speaking again, and Merton glanced at his hostess. He had not remarked them specially before, but now he noticed that Mrs. Harker had three long ropes of large beautifully matched pearls round her neck. "My jade beads didn't matter very much—though I lost half a dozen at least. But with those pearls—why, she might mislay a dozen if the rope was broken, and be none the wiser."

A jovial chuckle made Merton look up. Paul Harker was standing behind them, and he had evidently heard the girl's remark.

"I'm a Philistine, Iris. Forgive me. I don't somehow anticipate much danger to Rose's pearls."

"You're wrong, Mr. Harker," she said, gravely. "You've never seen a tangible materialisation. I have —and I know."

"Anyway," he laughed, "there's no use attempting to ask her to take them off, because she won't. And incidentally it looks to me as if the worthy Professor was going to get busy. There's a wild look in his eye."

"Will you take your seats, please, ladies and gentlemen? The two gentlemen on opposite sides of the room. I thank you." In a mournful way he contemplated the circle from the centre of the floor. "I would point out to all of you," he continued, "that our experiment to-night is a difficult one, entailing the highest form of will-co-operation and mental effort. If we are successful, I can tell no more than you what form this materialisation will take. But I must entreat of you to concentrate with all your power on the one main salient fact of producing a tangible thing: and I must beg of you most earnestly not, under any circumstances, to speak while the experiment is in progress. We will now put out the lights."

And the last thing Billy Merton was conscious of before the lights went out were Iris Sala's grey-green eyes fixed on him with an inscrutable, baffling look in them. Even in the darkness he seemed to see them: languorous, mocking, a little cynical. And there was something else—some other emotion which eluded him for the moment. It wasn't sorrow, though it seemed akin to sorrow; it was—yes, it was pity. He moved

slightly in his chair, and nodded his head in the darkness. Pity—that was the other message in those wonderful eyes: and the thought brought him back to the reality of his own position.

Paul Harker must have told her, of course: told her that he'd been losing heavily, and she was sorry for him. Even to a millionaire like Harker five thousand pounds on a single hand of poker would seem fairly heavy; and to him—— He gave a mirthless little laugh, which called forth an instant rebuke from the Professor.

"Perfect silence, please."

Billy Merton lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. His brain was racing with the feverish activity of a worried man. If it had been anything else—anything but a gambling debt. Thank God! his father was dead, and would never know the disgrace of it; but there were quite a number of relations. They'd soon find out; things of that sort can't be kept dark. What a fool, what a damnable fool he'd been!

And it was at that moment that there came a soft bump on the floor, and he heard the woman in the next chair to him draw in her breath sharply.

For a while he stared rigidly into the darkness; then, with a slight frown, he let his body relax. He was in no mood for entertainments of this type: he wished now that he hadn't come. And yet it had been very decent of Harker suggesting it—very decent. Was there a possibility, he wondered—if he made a clean breast of the whole thing to his host—was there a possibility of his lending four thousand? It seemed the only hope, the bare chance of salvation. He'd ask

him after this cursed séance was over. The worst that could happen would be a refusal. And supposing he didn't refuse? Supposing—— Billy drew in a deep breath at the mere thought.

Thump! thump! Perfectly clear and audible the sounds came from the centre of the room, bringing him back to the present, and he felt the back of his scalp begin to tingle. Of course, it was a trick; and yet he didn't somehow associate the Professor with a vulgar fraud. He had struck him as a well-meaning, conscientious man, who was badly in need of exercise and an outdoor life. Probably dyspeptic.

And if so—if it wasn't a trick—what was it that was now dragging itself about?

"Like a sack of potatoes." Iris Sala's words came back to him as he sat there motionless.

Suddenly he heard the Professor's voice, trembling a little with excitement:

"Who are you? Speak!"

The noise ceased at once; only a long-drawn shuddering sigh came out of the darkness. Then after a minute or two the uncanny dragging noise commenced again: bump—slither—bump. He tried to locate it, but it seemed everywhere. At one moment it was close by, at another it sounded as if it was at the other side of the room.

It was devilish, it was horrible. He put a hand to his forehead; it was wet with sweat. He felt an insane desire to get up from his chair and rush from the room: the only trouble was that he had forgotten the exact location of the door. Besides, he might bump into the Thing on the way.

A frightened cry rang out, and Billy Merton half-rose in his chair. It was a woman's cry: probably the Thing had touched her. The bumping had ceased, he noticed: another noise had taken its place—a slight gurgling sound, accompanied by a quick beating on the floor, as if someone was drumming with their feet on the carpet. And after a while that ceased also. Silence, absolute and complete, reigned in the room for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. The Thing had gone.

At length the Professor spoke.

"Are you still there?" There was no sound in answer. "Manifest yourself now if you are; otherwise the light will be turned up."

Still there was no sound, though the Professor waited a full minute before speaking again.

"Will you, please, turn up the light, Mr. Harker?"

"Certainly." Paul Harker's cheerful voice came from the other side of the room, as he rose to comply with the request. For a moment or two he fumbled with the switch; then the room was once more flooded with light.

"A most satisfactory manifestation," began the Professor, only to stop with a look of dawning horror on his face. Scattered around Mrs. Harker's chair were scores of wonderful pearls. Sprawling over the arm of the chair was the unfortunate woman herself.

For a moment there was a stunned silence in the room; then with a cry Paul Harker sprang forward.

"She's fainted. I'll get brandy."

He dashed from the room, as two of the women, reassured by the words, went over to Mrs. Harker.

"I knew it was risky wearing those pearls," whispered Iris Sala in Billy's ear, but he hardly heard what she said. He was staring at the limp form of his hostess through narrowed lids, and suddenly he turned to the girl beside him.

"It's a doctor that's wanted, not brandy," he said, abruptly. "Where's the telephone?"

"In the hall," answered the girl.

He ran downstairs, passing Paul Harker on the way. For what seemed an eternity he stood by the instrument before he could get through. Then he returned to the room above.

"A doctor's coming at once," he announced, breathlessly, and then he stopped dead—just inside the door.

Huddled together in a group at the end of the room were all the women—all save Iris Sala. She was standing by Mrs. Harker's chair, with Paul Harker on the other side.

"There is no need for a doctor, Mr. Merton," said Harker, in a terrible voice. "My wife is dead. And my wife has been murdered!"

"Murdered!" gasped Billy, mechanically.

"Murdered," repeated Harker. "Come and see."

Dazedly Billy walked towards him, to stop and stare foolishly at the woman in the chair. For they had propped her up and laid her head back, and on her throat distinct and clear were the marks of a hand. The four fingers on one side, the thumb on the other, showed up red and angry in the bright light.

"She had a weak heart, Mr. Merton," continued Paul Harker, slowly. "Any sudden shock, such as a hand grasping her throat"—his voice shook a little

—"would have been liable to kill her. And a hand *did* grasp her throat: the hand that tore off her pearls."

"My God!" muttered Billy. "It's ghastly—ghastly! Then that thing we heard must have—must have——"

"Must have murdered my wife, Mr. Merton. The question is—what was it we heard? I fear we shall find it difficult to persuade the police on the matter of a tangible materialisation. They deal in more mundane causes."

And at that moment Billy Merton understood. The relentless voice of the man, the strange look in the grey-green eyes of the girl—it seemed to be triumph now—cleared away the fog from his brain, leaving it ice-cold. He was a man who suddenly sees a flaring notice DANGER, and realises that there is peril ahead, though he knows not its exact form. And with men of the Merton stamp it is best to be careful at such moments.

"I see," he answered, slowly. "You mean that, regarded from the police point of view, the supposition will be that one of the people who were present during the séance tore the pearls from your wife's neck, and in doing so murdered her."

"Regarded from every point of view," corrected Paul Harker, harshly.

"Then under those circumstances," said Merton, grimly, "the police must be sent for at once."

With his hands in his pockets he was staring at Paul Harker, while from the other end of the room came an occasional sob from some overwrought woman.

The whole thing was like some horrible nightmare

—bizarre, unreal—and the sudden arrival of the doctor came as a relief to everyone. Quickly he made his examination. Then he stood up.

"How did that happen?" he asked, gravely, staring at the marks on the dead woman's throat.

"That man did it!" roared Harker, unable to contain himself longer and pointing an accusing finger at Merton. "You vile scoundrel! You blackguard! you—you——"

"Steady, Mr. Harker!" cried the doctor, sharply. "Am I to understand, sir, that you did this?" He turned in amazement to Merton.

"You are not," said Billy, evenly. "It's a damnable lie."

"I don't understand," remarked the doctor. "Will somebody kindly explain?"

It was Iris Sala who answered, and as she spoke the feeling that he was dreaming grew stronger in Billy Merton.

"We were having a séance, doctor," she began, in her deep rich voice, "trying to get a tangible materialisation. The room, of course, was in pitch-darkness, and after it was over and the lights were turned up we found that Mrs. Harker was—dead!"

Her voice faltered, and Harker lifted a grief-stricken face from beside his wife's chair.

"But what happened during the séance?" asked the doctor.

"We heard something moving about. A thing that bumped and slithered over the carpet."

"Pshaw!" snapped the doctor. "What I don't un-

derstand is why this gentleman should be accused of it."

"Because," cried Harker, getting up, "he's in desperate want of money. Look at this!" He fumbled in his pocket, and to Billy's amazement produced the cheque for four thousand he had written at the Ultima Thule. "I took this cheque to-night in exchange for one of my own—because I liked the look of you. Yes—you wicked villain—I liked the look of you; and I meant to do something for you. I brought him here, never dreaming—never thinking——" His voice broke again. "He saw my wife's pearls: was actually talking about them just before the séance started—and then when the light went out he must have snatched them off her neck. And in doing so you killed her. And to think I actually heard you doing the vile deed!"

"You deny this?" asked the doctor.

"Absolutely," returned Billy, grimly.

"I feel that it is partly my fault," said the girl, in a broken voice. "I never dreamed, of course, that this man was in want of money. And I told him a foolish story about how some jade beads I once had were snatched from my neck during a séance like this—by the thing that came. Of course—it wasn't true. It was a joke. But I told it just to frighten him. And I suppose he believed it, and thought he would do the same." She buried her face in her hands.

"Well, are any of the pearls missing? If so, where are they?" The doctor's question brought Paul Harker to his feet.

"I don't even know how many my dear wife had!" he cried.

"The point seems immaterial," said Billy, quietly. "Since I seem to be the object of suspicion, I should be obliged if you would search me, doctor."

With a shrug of his shoulders the doctor complied. Methodically he ran through every pocket; then he turned to Paul Harker.

"There are no pearls on this gentleman," he said, curtly.

"Ah, but he left the room. He left the room to telephone for you. He might have put them in his overcoat."

"Then we'll send for the overcoat," remarked the doctor, ringing the bell. "With your permission, that is, sir." He turned to Merton.

"By all means," said Billy. "Only I would like to state, should they be found there, that I am not the only person who has left the room since the tragedy. Mr. Harker has also been downstairs."

Paul Harker laughed wildly.

"Yes, I know. To get brandy. Before I knew——"

He paused as a footman opened the door.

"Bring this gentleman's overcoat," ordered the doctor, "up to this room. And be careful to see that nothing falls out of the pockets."

With one horrified glance at the motionless figure in the chair, the footman fled, returning almost immediately with the coat.

"This is your coat?" asked the doctor.

"It is," said Billy.

And then in a tense silence the doctor extracted twenty large pearls from different pockets.

"You murderer!" Paul Harker's low whispered words seemed to ring through the room, and with a little strangled gasp a woman fainted. The doctor's face, grim and accusing, was turned on Billy, as if demanding some explanation which he knew full well could not be given. And of all those present only Billy Merton himself seemed cool and calm, as, with his hands still in his pockets, he faced the ring of his accusers.

"What have you to say?" said the doctor, sternly.

"One thing—and one thing only," answered Billy. "I have read in fiction of diabolical plots: to-night I have met one in real life. But, as so often happens in fiction, one mistake is made, which leads to the undoing of the villain. And one mistake has been made to-night."

And now his eyes, merciless and stern, were fixed on Paul Harker, and he noticed with a certain grim amusement that a muscle in the millionaire's face was beginning to twitch.

"Mr. Harker is a man of nerve: he also believes in seizing the right moment. And to-night struck him as being the right moment."

"What are you talking about?" snarled Harker.

"For reasons best known to yourself, Mr. Harker" —he glanced from him to Iris Sala, from whose eyes the strange look of triumph had mysteriously vanished, leaving only fear—deadly, gripping fear—"you wished to get rid of your wife."

"It's a lie!" Paul Harker sprang forward, his fist raised to strike.

"You will doubtless have ample opportunity for proving it," continued Billy, imperturbably. "By a happy combination of circumstances, a suitable moment—the darkness of a séance—and a suitable motive —robbery—presented themselves to your hand. Acting according to your tradition, you took them. And as far as I can see, Mr. Harker, you would have been successful had you also selected a suitable person. Therein lay your one error."

"Am I to understand," said Harker, in a grating voice, "that you are accusing *me*—of murdering my wife? Why—you miserable cur——" He stopped, choking with anger.

"I make no such accusation," answered Billy. "All I state is that I didn't." He turned gravely to the doctor. "What was the cause of Mrs. Harker's death?"

"Heart failure—caused by partial strangulation with the hand."

"Which hand?"

The doctor looked at him quickly; then glanced once more at the dead woman.

"The right hand."

"You swear to that?"

"Undoubtedly I swear to it," said the doctor.

For the first time Billy Merton withdrew his right hand from his pocket, and held it out in front of him.

"The one mistake," he said, grimly.

The first, second, and third fingers were missing!

For a moment there was a deathly silence; then the doctor suddenly sprang forward.

"Stop him!" he roared.

But Paul Harker had already joined the woman he had foully killed, and in the air there hung the faint smell of burnt almonds. Prussic acid is quick.

An hour later Billy Merton walked slowly along the deserted streets towards his rooms. The police had come and gone; everything in the room where the tragedy had taken place had duly passed before the searching eye of officialdom. Everything, that is, save one exhibit, and that reposed in Billy's pocket. And when a man has signed a cheque for four thousand pounds on a total bank balance of as many pence, his pocket is the best place for it.

X

A MATTER OF ROUTINE

I

THE woman seated in an arm-chair by the fire stirred restlessly and crumpled the letter still tighter in her hand. Even now she felt dazed at this thing that had happened—this numbing, horrible thing she had found out accidentally two short hours ago. Two hours! It seemed an eternity. At first a blind rage had possessed her, to give place after a while to a sick, incredulous wonder that Bill could have done such a thing. And that in turn had given way to a fierce pride. Never again—never again. Divorce she knew was impossible—but she could get a separation.

After seven years! A wave of self-pity swept over her—pity for her whole sex. Why were men such brutes? And the faint perfume which still clung to the note she held seemed to rise and suffocate her.

The noise of the front door closing roused her, and as she heard her husband's voice in the hall she shivered slightly. The next moment he had come into the room, and she saw the flash of his teeth in the dim light.

"Hullo! Kid." He crossed to her chair. "Pensive in the gloaming. . . ." She felt him looking at her curiously. "Anything wrong?" he asked, quietly.

"You remember asking me to mend the pocket of your old smoking-jacket?" She tried to speak normally, but her voice sounded strange to her ears.

"I do," he answered, slowly. Good Lord! What on earth? Surely he hadn't been such a damned fool as to leave anything in the coat. "Couldn't you find it?"

"Oh! yes, I found it. I also found this." With fingers that shook a little he took the note from her hand. What a thrice damned fool not to have burnt it! . . . The only hope was that it was not one of the really incriminating ones. "Perhaps you'd refresh your memory as to the contents and explain. Not that there is anything to explain: it all seems painfully clear."

In silence he took the note over to the window and glanced through it. And as he did so his last hope went. It alluded specifically to a previous week-end, and confirmed plans for a forthcoming one.

With a little crash a coal fell into the grate. Dear heavens! What a fool he had been! To jeopardise his whole future life and happiness; to hurt the woman he loved so cruelly—for what! . . . For a short episode, pleasant while it lasted, but which had soon palled: for a bit of cursed carelessness in not destroying all the evidence of it. . . .

"Well!" His wife's voice, dead and flat, roused him from his thoughts, and he came slowly back into the room.

"I don't quite know what to say to you, Ruth." He picked up the tongs, and with great care replaced the burning ember on the fire.

"It's true, of course? You've lived with this girl?"

"Yes—I have. For a short while last summer. It's all over now; has been for months."

"Who is she?"

"Does it matter very much?" He stared at the flames, his handsome face a little haggard. "It meant nothing to me at the time; it means less than nothing to me now."

"How gratifying for the girl!" Ruth Daventry laughed hardly. "If it meant nothing to you—why did you do it?"

"God knows!" said the man, bitterly. "Why do men make fools of themselves? I suppose—you don't believe me. . . ."

Once again his wife laughed. "The foolishness in this case was breaking the eleventh commandment, wasn't it—not the seventh?"

"That's not fair, Ruth. . . . You know it's not fair. . . ." With his hands in his pockets, he stared down at her. "I suppose it's useless to try and make you see that—that it means so much less to a man than it does to a woman. . . ."

"Man's eternal argument. . . ."

"Yes," he agreed, gravely. "Man's eternal argument—perhaps. Nevertheless true for all that."

"Go on—run through the whole gamut. Man is by nature polygamous, etc., and so forth. . . ."

Bill Daventry bit his lip. "Can't you believe, Ruth, that unless one loves at the same time—it means nothing."

She rose and stood facing him. "No, I can't. I can't believe anything—I can't grasp anything, except the one all-important fact, that when I was giving you

everything you went off with another woman. You say it meant nothing to you: then I must mean nothing to you also. . . . Perhaps it's fortunate: you won't miss me in the future."

For a moment his heart seemed to stop beating. "What do you mean, Ruth?" he whispered. "What do you mean about the—future?"

"Simply that I have no intention whatever of living with you again. That's what I mean by the future. In time perhaps we can fix up a divorce; if not, it will have to be a judicial separation. But whatever it is, under no circumstances will I continue to live as your wife." Her hands clenched by her sides. "To think that you could have gone straight from me to her—and then come back again to me! I think—I think—I hate you." Her breath was coming quickly. "It wasn't as if I'd ever refused you—anything; you know that. It wasn't as if I'd been away from home, even. But I was here—actually here with you—the whole time. . . ."

"But, Ruth, my dear!" Desperately he fenced for time. "Can't you understand—it was just a temporary madness. I can't condone it—I can't excuse it: I can only ask you to forgive it. On my honour, it has never happened before during our married life; on my honour, it will never happen again. . . ."

"Honour!" She laughed, sneeringly. "Your brand of that commodity seems hardly above suspicion. Oh! if I could only understand what made you go to her! . . . It seems so dreadfully tawdry; so—so rotten and unworthy."

"I don't understand myself," muttered Daventry,

miserably. "I think it was—the novelty—that made me do it."

"Novelty!" Frankly amazed, she stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Novelty! What on earth do you mean? Are you trying to pose as if you were a boy sampling life for the first time?" With a gesture of disgust she turned away. "I don't flatter myself that I was the first woman you lived with—no woman does. And however much we may wish it—we're brought up on that idea. But afterwards—it's different, utterly different. We have the right then to demand the same as we give—straightness. After marriage there is not one law for the man and another for the woman. If you can do that sort of thing, why shouldn't I? I'd like some novelty, too. . . ."

"Ruth! for God's sake. . . ."

"It's all very well adopting that tone now you've been found out. You don't want to lose your housekeeper and permanent stand-by, when fresh 'novelties' attract you. A most comfortable arrangement for you, isn't it? The only drawback is that I refuse to fall in with it."

She turned away, and picked up her bag from the chair where she had been sitting.

"My part of the show is over." She paused opposite him on her way to the door. "I hope you understand that quite clearly. I will *not* live with you again, and you are therefore at liberty to search for more novelty. I also hold myself free to do the same. I shall go to the Carlisles for to-night, and send for my luggage to-morrow. After that we had better leave the lawyers to fix things up."

She swept past him, and a moment later he heard her moving about in the room above. Their room! Once he started as if to go to her before it was too late, and plead with her again; then he shook his head and hesitated. . . . In her present mood he realised that it was hopeless.

At last he heard the front door slam. She had gone: Ruth had gone. With a groan he buried his face in his hands, while the flames threw fantastic shadows round the darkening room. . . . And suddenly the man rose and flung himself on his knees in front of the chair where she had always sat . . . the chair which still held the faint perfume of the scent she used.

II

Ruth Daventry arrived just as tea was over, and Nancy Carlisle rose to greet her.

"My dear! I'm so glad to see you. Have you had tea?"

"I don't want any, Nancy." Ruth drew her hostess on one side, hardly conscious of the other occupants of the room. "Can you put me up for the night? . . . I've left Bill. . . ."

"Left Bill?" Amazement showed in the other's face; then, realising that this was no time for confidences, she went on rapidly: "Of course, Ruth; delighted. . . . We'll talk after . . ." She turned round as her husband came up.

"Ruth wants a shake-down for the night, Bob."

"Splendid." Bob Carlisle's voice resembled a loud and jovial human foghorn. "But we can't manage

Bill, can we, old soul? Not unless someone sleeps in the bathroom, or beds down in the parrot's cage—what. . . ." He relapsed into mutterings under the baleful eye of his wife, and it was at that moment that Ruth saw Howard Brockton.

"Why, Mrs. Daventry," he remarked, coming towards her with a smile, "it's five years—five long, weary years . . ."

"So it is. I thought you were in Peru." For an appreciable time she let her hand rest in his; then with an answering smile she turned to her hostess. "He was always an elusive person, wasn't he?"

"Turned up this morning," boomed Bob Carlisle. "That's why we can't put up old Bill. Eh!—what, my dear? What are you making faces for?"

"Bill doesn't want to be put up to-night, Bob," his wife remarked, quietly. "So, as they say in Parliament, the question does not arise. Ring the bell for some more tea. I insist, Ruth; there's no good saying you don't want it."

For a while the conversation became general, and then Nancy Carlisle glanced at the clock.

"My dear"—she turned to Ruth—"it's most annoying, and if I'd known you were coming I'd have got out of it. . . . But do you mind a solitary evening?"

"I'd prefer it, Nancy. Don't think about me. . . ."

"Bob and I have got to dine out, and Howard has some engagement at his club."

"Which," remarked Howard Brockton, quietly, "can very easily be put off. It's just as you like, Mrs. Daventry—and if you really would prefer to be alone, I'll

totter to the club. But if not—what about some dinner and a play?"

For a moment she hesitated: it was more than seven years ago now that he had at last taken her "No" as final. And when they had met the next time—two years after—he had given no sign that he still felt the same for her. After all, she didn't want to think that night: she didn't want to be alone. . . . She wanted to forget: and if Bill didn't care, there were other men who did.

"Well, if you're sure you aren't missing something vital at the club . . ."

"I am," laughed Brockton. "A discussion on alluvial deposits with a City magnate which will send him to sleep and me insane. I'll 'phone for a table and two stalls. . . ."

He left the room, followed by Bob Carlisle, and for a moment the two women were alone.

"What is it, Ruth? What's happened?"

"I've found things out, Nancy. I've found Bill out. . . . I hate him——"

"Another woman?"

"Some girl called Madge. This last summer . . ." With her eyes hard she stared at the other. "Why are men such brutes?"

"But I don't understand, dear. . . . Is it all over?"

"He says so." Ruth Daventry gave a short laugh. "But how can I believe him? If he can deceive me over one thing, he'll deceive me always."

"I've got two stalls for *The Barge Girl*." Howard Brockton's voice broke in on their conversation, and Ruth swung round.

"Good! I haven't seen it." He held the door open for her as she passed out, and for a fleeting second their eyes met. Then she had gone and was following their hostess to her room.

"In an hour?" he called after her.

"Or thereabouts," she answered, pausing on the stairs and looking back at him. "I'm a fairly punctual person. . . ."

For a moment he stood by the door staring after her; then with a faint smile on his face he again went to the telephone and gave an order. . . . After which he mixed himself a cocktail and then went upstairs to dress.

"Bob; come here a minute." Nancy was putting the finishing touches to her hair.

"What is it?" Her husband, wrestling with a collar-stud, came through from his dressing-room.

"How long have you known Howard?"

"About umpteen years, old soul. Damn this stud."

"Did he ever want to marry Ruth?"

Bob Carlisle stared at his wife suspiciously. "What are you driving at?" he demanded at length.

"My dear man, I asked you a perfectly plain question. Did Howard Brockton ever want to marry Ruth?"

"Well, if you must know, I believe he did," answered her husband. "Why?"

"Never mind why. And you've got a dent in the middle of your shirt."

He came over to her glass to inspect it—and inci-

dentally improve the occasion by kissing the back of her neck.

"What's the trouble with her and old Bill?" he inquired, tying his tie.

"Bill's made a damned fool of himself—and he deserves to lose her," answered his wife. "I want to see Bill—to-night. . . . Only she's not to know. . . . We've got to leave early, Bob. . . ."

"Thank God for that. . . ."

"And you've got to ring Bill up—and tell him to be at home. I want to hear his side of the case. . . ."

"Right-ho, my angel. . . . Anything to oblige. . . . What time will she and Howard be back?"

"About eleven, I suppose. And we've got to see Bill and be back here before then. . . ."

"I say, what are you getting at in your old grey matter about Ruth and Howard?" Bob Carlisle loomed into view again with his overcoat on his arm.

"A bit too deep for you, my boy," laughed Nancy. "I have a sort of idea that he may prove rather useful to-night—if left completely alone. . . ."

"Shouldn't be surprised," conceded her husband. "He's a deuced clever fellow is old Howard. But hadn't you better tip him the wink that all is not for the best in the Daventry family? Give him a line, don't you know, to go on?"

"You blessed angel," said his wife. "For a bright lad of the village, you're an awful ass at times, aren't you? That's why I love you so much. . . . Mind my frock, Bob."

With a little laugh he put her down, and she picked up her gloves.

"Now don't forget, old son—not a word to Howard. Not a word. . . ."

"I've clicked; the order has penetrated. . . . Though how he can do anything if he doesn't know . . ."

"He does know, idiot boy: he knew the instant she came into the room. . . . And a little knowledge is an excellent thing—in some cases. . . ."

Bob Carlisle sat down weakly on the edge of the bed as his wife left the room; then he rose and followed her.

"You see, Bob, the great point is this." She looked up at him, as he overtook her on the stairs. "Ruth hates Bill—she told me so. And that's a sure sign. . . ."

"What of?" he murmured, vaguely.

"Why, that she doesn't, stupid," answered his wife.

"My God!" muttered Bob. "I leave it to you, partner. . . ."

"Also, she's put on my very prettiest frock, which she had to borrow as she hadn't brought one of her own that was suitable. Entirely for Howard's benefit. . . ."

"I think I'll have a little alcohol," said her husband, feebly. "My brain is rotating like a flail. . . ."

"You can mix me a cocktail, too. . . . What lovely flowers!"

She walked over to the table and glanced at a mass of carnations which had just arrived.

"Two little bunches to celebrate the wanderer's return." Howard joined them from the drawing-room. "Mrs. Daventry not down yet, I see. . . . May I present you with this one?"

"Thank you—they're sweet. . . . And Ruth's favourite flower——"

"A thanks offering at having been spared alluvial deposits." He glanced up as Ruth came down the stairs. "For my deliverer from insanity," he murmured. . . . And once again their eyes met. . . .

III

Howard Brockton was the type of man described by women as charming, and by men as a damn good fellow, and the description did him no more than justice. Essentially virile, perfectly groomed, and a most amusing companion, he was the object of considerable attention from mothers with marriageable daughters—a fact of which he was fully aware. But so far the only woman who had ever really caused him the slightest desire to forsake bachelordom was Ruth Daventry. And when she had married Daventry he had accepted it as a rub of the green, and gone off to shoot big game—not because it was a conventional method of forgetting his sorrow, but because he liked shooting big game.

It took him till half-way through dinner to find out exactly what had occurred, and then, for a while, he became a little thoughtful. Ruth was looking singularly lovely, and he was a connoisseur of lovely women—without being a glutton. . . . Also, he hardly knew Bill Daventry, an important point in his easy and yet very rigid code of morals. The situation was pleasantly intriguing; as dinner went on it became delightful. . . . And not being the strong, righteous person of fiction, but an ordinary man of the world, he played

the game with the ease of a master to whom every move is known. There was no definite intention in his mind: the future could be left to take care of itself. At the moment, which was all that mattered, a lovely woman was proving once again that it is not a game to her sex, but a natural habit acquired at birth: far be it from him not to keep his end up. And if once or twice she fell silent, and stared in front of her with her thoughts far away, it was only a prelude to added zest in the moves.

It was on the way home after the theatre that matters brought themselves to a head. At least that was how he put it to himself afterwards in thinking it over. But as the taxi went past the Ritz into the comparative darkness of the Park, he found Ruth in his arms.

"My dear!" he whispered. "Why not? After what's happened. . . ."

He felt her shiver; then she kissed him. . . . And then she shrank away into the farthest corner of the car. He saw her profile in the passing light of a lamp, and it was set and hard. He could read her thoughts almost as if she had spoken them aloud; he knew that even at that moment she was thinking of her husband; he knew that it was wounded pride that had provoked that kiss—not anything on which he could personally flatter himself.

But when she turned and kissed him again, he took what the gods gave thankfully. He heard her half-breathed "Why not, Howard—why not?" and he echoed it with his arms tight round her, stammering a little as he spoke. Howard Brockton was no longer

merely a charming man of the world; he was a man—and the way seemed easy. . . .

It was Bob Carlisle who opened the door to them, and, roaring like a bull as usual, followed them into the drawing-room, where Nancy, with her evening cloak still over her shoulders, stood awaiting them. She flashed one quick, penetrating glance at them both; then she waved a hand towards the whisky.

"Drink, Howard? Help yourself. . . . Ruth, you look tired. Good show?"

"Very," returned the other, quietly.

"What was it about?" boomed Bob Carlisle.

"My dear man," laughed his wife, "fancy asking what a musical comedy is about. . . . Are you ready for bed, Ruth?"

At the drink table, Howard Brockton paused for the fraction of a second before he splashed the soda into his glass.

"Quite. . . . I am rather tired. Good-night, Bob." She hesitated a moment, then she held out her hand to Brockton. "Thank you so much," she murmured.

"Thank *you*," he answered, very low. The other two were talking by the door—he had one instant. "Ruth—my dear," he whispered, insistently; "can't I see you—alone? . . ."

She shivered and withdrew her hand.

"You don't owe him anything. . . ." The man's voice was masterful. "Look at the way he has deceived you. . . ."

She stared at him silently, then she drew a deep breath.

"You know my room," she said. . . . "But I don't promise anything. . . ."

Then she was gone, and Bob Carlisle, joining the other man, found him smiling quietly.

"What's the jolly old jest?" he boomed.

"The oldest in the world, Bob: a chestnut of the chestnuts. But perennially fresh. . . . How went the dinner?"

"Perfectly atrocious. . . . Wish to Heaven we could have come with you."

"Yes," murmured Howard Brockton. "It was a pity. . . ."

IV

"Well, Ruth—how do you find Howard after all this time?" Nancy Carlisle flicked the ash from her cigarette into the fire.

"Just the same as ever. . . . Shall I hang your frock up here, or will you take it to your room?"

"Leave it on the bed: I'll take it with me. You nearly married him once, didn't you?"

"I did think about it—years ago. . . ."

"A perfectly charming man. . . . I suppose you told him about your trouble with Bill."

"I did. There's no good trying to conceal it: everyone will know soon that we've parted."

"Bob and I went round to see Bill this evening. . . ."

Ruth Daventry turned round from the dressing-table and stared at the speaker.

"You went round to see Bill?" she repeated, slowly. "Why?"

"Just to hear his side of the story, my dear. . . ."

"Was it any different to mine?"

"No—exactly the same. . . ."

"Did you tell him I was out with Howard?"

"Bob boomed it out in his usual idiotic way."

"Why idiotic? It's nothing to do with Bill now whom I go out with. . . . Bill has forfeited all right to control my actions—as I told him. . . . He wanted novelty: that was the attraction of Madge. . . . I'll have a little novelty, too. . . ."

"And do you like the novelty?" Nancy Carlisle lit another cigarette.

"What do you mean?" Once more Ruth swung round on the speaker.

"For a man of Howard's knowledge to fail to remove the powder from his coat is a really surprising lapse. . . . He kissed you, of course. . . ."

"What if he did?" returned Ruth, slowly.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing, my dear—*if you really wanted him to.* Did you? If you did, I've got nothing more to say. But—did you?" She rose and crossed to the dressing-table, and the eyes of the two women met.

"You didn't. . . . You needn't tell me. I can see. . . . You didn't. . . . Then, Ruth, is that the way out—for you? Howard is not a man who stops at kissing. . . . Is that the way out? Will you be any happier if you have an affair with him?"

"I don't see why Bill should have the monopoly . . ." began Ruth.

"Of making a fool of himself? Why, do you want to compete? My dear, Bill is the sorriest man in London to-night. . . ."

"Words are easy." With a bang she put down her brushes and stood up. "Very easy."

"There's only one thing easier, Ruth," said the other, gravely.

"What's that?"

"Doing something on the spur of the moment out of pique or jealousy which you'll regret all your life. . . . You still love Bill. . . ."

"I hate him, I tell you."

"You still love Bill, and knowing that you did, I was glad when Howard took you to the theatre. . . . The result has panned out as it was bound to pan out: now you've got to use your common sense. . . . Howard has made love to you to-night, and you've let him, though you haven't really wanted it. . . . But you didn't realise it until he actually kissed you. . . . Then you knew. . . ."

"Well—assuming you're right—what then?"

"This. You are in the same position now as Bill was in when his miserable little liaison finished. Then he knew."

"My dear Nancy, I fail to see the slightest connection between the two cases. . . . It isn't as if I had . . ." And suddenly a vivid flush mounted to her cheeks and stained her neck and shoulders.

"Ah!" The other turned away and stared at the fire. Then after a while she continued, slowly: "It's pique and wounded pride that have driven you: it was something else that drove him."

"Novelty," agreed Ruth.

"No—not novelty; routine. . . ."

"Routine! . . . What on earth do you mean?" In

unfeigned amazement she stood motionless by the foot of the bed. "What on earth do you mean?" she repeated, slowly.

"My dear," began Nancy, slowly, "do you mind if I speak openly? . . ."

"You've hardly been mincing words up to date, have you?" said Ruth, with a faint smile.

"No—I haven't. . . . But I don't want you to think that I'm preaching. At the same time, I'd never forgive myself if you and Bill go and mess things up. . . . There are all too few happy marriages, dear, at the best of times. And one doesn't want to see a happy one wrecked if one can prevent it. . . ."

Ruth's mouth set in a straight line, but she said nothing.

"Bill's vulgar little escapade, Ruth, was largely your fault. . . ."

"My fault! Nancy, you're mad. . . ." She laughed incredulously.

"Your fault," repeated the other. "Unconscious, I know; but your fault for all that. . . . The very thing which to your mind made Bill's behaviour most inexcusable is the thing that made him do it. Your relations with him had become routine—and everybody hates routine. . . . Tries to break away from it. . . . My dear, I nearly let Bob do the same thing a year ago. That's why I'm speaking about what I know. . . ." She was still staring at the fire with a thoughtful smile.

"I knew there was something the matter; he was becoming restless, bored. . . . Not very much; but enough for me to see. . . . We went away for a

change, but that did no good. . . . Then I sent him off fishing by himself—and when he came back he was his old self—for a little. . . . Then the boredom returned. He still boomed in his cheery way—but—there was something. . . . He had ceased to be a lover: he had become merely a husband. And I asked myself why. And one day I got what I thought was the answer. I tried it, and found I was right. . . ."

"What was the answer, Nancy?"

"This," said the other, gravely. "I had ceased to be a mistress: I had become merely a wife. . . . Routine —the death of romance—had crept in imperceptibly. . . . It's bad for everyone to have what they want whenever they want it. Especially for men. . . . They're such babies. . . . It becomes a habit—a thing taken as a matter of course. And therefore it loses its value in their eyes . . . while something, infinitely tawdry in all probability, takes on for the moment a fictitious worth. . . . Seems desirable; promises a change—when one woman if she's wise can give her man all the change he needs. . . ."

"Always the woman who has got to struggle." Ruth's voice was a little bitter.

"Yes; always. . . . But the struggle is worth it; you know that as well as I do."

For a while there was silence in the room; then Nancy Carlisle pitched her cigarette into the grate.

"Good-night, old thing. . . . I think I'm right: I think you know I'm right. I told Bill I'd ring him up after I'd seen you. . . . He's nearly off his head. . . . Do you want me to say anything in particular? . . ."

Ruth slowly shook her head: she seemed to be turning some problem over in her mind.

"I don't want you to telephone him at all," she said at length. "I want Bob to get me a taxi if he can. . . ."

V

"Have another spot, old man, before toddling up to roost." Bob Carlisle returned to the drawing-room, as the sound of a taxi died away in the distance. "Had the devil of a job to get that bally machine. . . . But there you are—all in a good cause. . . . Less work for the jolly old divorce court and all that. . . . I don't mind telling you now, that there was the hell of a rumpus on between her and Bill. . . . Silly blighter got found out, don't you know."

"I gathered there was some trouble," said Brockton, casually.

"But Nancy has put it all right. . . . Deuced clever girl, Nancy. Been giving it to Ruth in the neck upstairs. . . . And then a cheery evening with you, of course, paved the way. . . . Made her forget, don't you know: took the raw edge off. . . . Nancy thought it might. . . . Told me so when we were dressing for dinner. . . ."

It was then that Howard Brockton's lips began to twitch: as has been said, he was a connoisseur and not a glutton.

"Bob," he remarked, "Nancy hasn't a twin sister, has she?"

"Not to her knowledge," boomed Bob.

"That's a pity. . . . I'm looking for a wife myself. . . ."

"You leave it to Nancy, old boy. She'll find you one. . . ."

Howard Brockton's lips twitched still more.

"After this evening, Bob, I'd leave anything to her with the utmost confidence. . . ."

XI

A PAYMENT ON ACCOUNT

I

"EXCUSE me, but could you give me some idea as to where I am? I have a shrewd notion that it's Devonshire, but——"

The speaker, holding a dilapidated cap in his hand, broke off as the girl sat up and looked at him. He was a dishevelled-looking object, covered with dust, and—romance may be great, but truth is greater—it was only too obvious to the girl that he was very hot. Perspiration ran in trickles down his face, ploughing dark furrows through the thick stratum of road dust which otherwise obscured his features. His collar was open, his sleeves rolled back from his wrists, and on his back was strapped a small knapsack. An unlit pipe, which he had removed from his mouth on speaking to her, in one hand, and a long walking-stick in the other, completed the picture.

"You don't look as if you'd been flying," she remarked, dispassionately. "It's Devonshire all right."

"That's a relief." She had a fleeting glimpse of a flash of white teeth as he smiled. "I had an idea it might be Kent. Or even farther. Have you ever been on a walking tour?"

"That's what you're doing, is it?"

"You know," remarked the man, "I think even Watson would regard you with scorn. And our one and only Sherlock would burst into tears." He leaned over the railings and commenced to fill his pipe. The little garden in which the girl was sitting seemed delightfully cool and shady; the girl herself, in her muslin frock, looking at him with an amused twinkle in her eyes, seemed almost too good to be true. After that interminable road, with the sun beating down from a cloudless sky. With a sigh of relief he passed the back of his hand across his forehead, and the girl laughed.

"I wouldn't do it by bits if I were you. It makes you look rather like a zebra."

"Don't mock at me," he implored, "or I shall burst into tears. It's the very first time I've ever done anything of this sort, I promise you. I will go farther. It's the very last as well."

"But if you don't like walking—why walk?"

"How like a woman!" He fumbled in his pocket for a box of matches and lit his pipe. "How exactly like! Have you never felt an irresistible temptation to do something wild and desperate? Something which is painted in glowing colours by some scoundrel, who revenges himself on humanity by foully inducing innocent people to follow his advice?"

"I once tried keeping bees," she murmured, thoughtfully.

"There you are!" exclaimed the man, triumphantly. "You see you are in no position to point the finger of scorn at me. You were led away by fictitious rubbish

on the bee as a household pet. You expected honey: you obtained stings. I was likewise led away by a scoundrel who wrote on the delights of walking. He especially roused my expectation by the number of times he threw himself down on the soft, sweet-smelling turf while the gentle wind played round his temples and the lazy beat of the breakers came from the distant Atlantic. I tried that exercise the very first day. Net result: I landed on a thistle and winded myself."

She gurgled gently. "At any rate, I'll bet he told you that you ought to come with a map."

"Wrong again. He especially stipulated that you should have no set route. Just walk and walk; and then, I suppose, when a kindly death intervenes, your relatives can't find you, and your funeral expenses fall on the parish in which you expire."

He straightened up as the door of the house opened and a charming, grey-haired woman came slowly down the path. She glanced at him quickly—a courteous but shrewd look; then she looked at the girl.

"Sheila, dear, who——?"

"A gentleman on a walking tour, mother, who has lost his way."

"You're not far from Umberleigh," said the elder woman. "Where are you making for?"

"Nowhere in particular, as I've been explaining to your daughter, madam," smiled the man. "Finally, however, I shall take the train and arrive in London and slaughter the man who wrote the article which appeared in the paper."

"Sounds like the house that Jack built," laughed the girl. "Anyway, you'd better stop to lunch."

The man glanced at her mother, who seconded the invitation with a gracious smile.

"My name is Hewson," he remarked. "Charles Hewson." He glanced at them as he spoke, and gave a little sigh of relief: evidently the name meant nothing to them. "And I don't always look like a zebra."

He followed them slowly up the shady path, and the girl laughed again.

"Doesn't matter what you look like," she cried, "as long as you know something about postage-stamps."

"Do you collect?" he asked.

"No—but daddy does. He's partially insane on the subject."

"Sheila!" reproved her mother.

"Well, he is, darling, you know. You always say so yourself."

For a moment the elder woman's eyes met the man's over the girl's head. And in that momentary glance the whole story of the house and its inmates seemed to stand revealed. The perfect love and happiness that breathed through the place; the certainty that it was the girl who was really the head of the little kingdom, with a sweet mother and an unpractical father as her adoring subjects; the glorious unworldliness of his surroundings struck the man like a blow. The contrast was so wonderful—the contrast to his own life. If only—— Unconsciously his glance rested on the slim figure in the muslin frock. If only—— Why not?

"I beg your pardon." He turned apologetically to the mother.

"I only said that our name was Crossley, Mr. Hew-

son. And I wondered if you would care to have a bath."

Charles Hewson looked at her gravely. "Are you always so charming, Mrs. Crossley, to the stranger within your gates? Especially when he's a dirty-looking tramp like me." Then he smiled quickly; it was a trick of his, that sudden, fleeting smile. "I can think of nothing I'd like more than a bath, if I might so far trespass on your hospitality."

II

Lunch confirmed his diagnosis of the Crossley household. The girl's father fitted in exactly with his mental picture; an utterly lovable, white-haired man of about sixty, and as unsophisticated as a child. Time, and the stress of things worldly, seemed to have passed over the little house near Umberleigh, leaving it untouched and scathless. And once again the contrast struck him, and he wondered, just a little bitterly, whether after all it was worth it. The instant decisions, the constant struggle, the ceaseless strain of his life—and then, this. Country cousins, vegetating in obscurity. It struck Charles Hewson that he wouldn't object to being a vegetable for a while. He was tired, and he realised it for the first time. The last year had tried even him.

It was a sudden impulse that made him suggest it, just as luncheon was over.

"Is there a decent inn here, Mrs. Crossley, where I could put up for a bit? I've fallen in love with this place, and I want a rest."

"You look tired," she answered, kindly. "And this is a wonderful place for a rest cure. But I'm afraid the inn is a long way off. If you care to"—she paused for a moment—"we could put you up for a few days."

"I think you're the kindest people I've ever met," said Hewson, and for a moment his eyes ceased to look tired. "And I warn you I'm not going to give you a chance of reconsidering your offer."

"You'll find it very dull," warned the girl.

He laughed as they rose from the table. "I'm open to a small bet that you'll have to drive me away. I shall become a fixture about the house."

He followed them into the low, old-fashioned hall, and stood for a while drinking in the homeliness of it all. That was what it was—homely; and in London Charles Hewson lived in rooms and fed at his club or a restaurant.

"I don't know if you're any judge of pewter, Mr. Hewson," said his host, "but we've got some nice bits here and in my study."

"One step from that to postage-stamps," laughed the girl. "You've got to come and do a job of work in the garden later, Mr. Hewson, don't forget. I'll come and rescue you in half an hour or so."

He watched her go upstairs, then with a little sigh of pure joy he followed the old man into his study.

"Are you interested in philately, by any chance?" inquired Mr. Crossley, eagerly.

Hewson shook his head. "I'm afraid I know nothing about it," he answered. "I was once commissioned by a young nephew to send him all the stamps I could find which had pretty pictures on them. You know,

harbours, and mountains, and elephants. I found them in all sorts of outlandish places when I was going round the world." He gave one of his quick smiles. "But I'm afraid that is the extent of my knowledge."

"The schoolboy collection." The other waved a tolerant hand. "Now I'm sure that that would have bored him."

With reverent hands he lifted a card and handed it to Hewson. "Look at that, sir; look at that. The complete set of New Brunswick—the first issue, unused."

Hewson gazed dispassionately at ten somewhat blotchy pieces of paper, and refrained from heretical utterance. To his Philistine eye the set he had bought in Samoa or elsewhere depicting jaguars and toucans were infinitely more pleasing.

"Valuable, I suppose?" he hazarded.

The other waved a deprecating hand. "Several hundred—if I chose to sell. Mercifully," he went on after a little pause, "it wasn't necessary."

For a second Hewson's shrewd eyes were fixed on him: then he resumed his study of the rarities. Money trouble, was there?

"Now this *was* unique—this set." His host was looking regretfully at another card. "Mauritius. And then I had to dispose of the penny orange-red. Worth the better part of a thousand pounds alone." He laid down the card. "Oh! I do hope I shall be able to get it back. I sold it to a dealer in the Strand, and I told him at the time that I should want to buy it back again. That was a month ago, and I thought I should have been able to by now."

Once again Hewson's keen eyes were fixed on the other.

"Expecting a legacy?" he remarked, casually.

"A legacy! Oh! no!" The old man smiled. "But I had a very wonderful chance, given me by an acquaintance, of doubling my small capital." For a moment Hewson stopped smoking: chances of doubling capital are not handed round as a rule by acquaintances. "And I seem to have done it," continued Mr. Crossley, rubbing his hands together. "I seem to have turned my five thousand pounds into ten. In a month. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Very," commented the other. "Have you got the money?"

"No: that's what I can't understand. I suppose it must be something to do with settling day—or whatever they call it." He beamed at his listener. "I'm afraid I'm very ignorant on these matters, Mr. Hewson, but it seems almost too good to be true. I wanted the extra money so much—to give my little girl a better time. It's dull for her here, though she never complains. And if only I could get it now, I could buy back that penny Mauritius, and invest the other nine thousand." In his excitement he walked up and down the room, while his listener stared fixedly at a number of blotchy pieces of paper on a card. "Do you know anything about stocks and shares, Mr. Hewson?"

"Quite a lot," said Hewson. "In my—er—small way I dabble in them."

"Ah! then perhaps you can tell me when I can expect the money." Mr. Crossley sat down at his desk, and opened a drawer. "It was a month ago that I paid

five thousand pounds for shares in the Rio Lopez Mine."

"In the what?" Hewson almost shouted.

"The Rio Lopez Mine," repeated the other. "You've heard of it, of course. The shares were standing, so my friend told me, at two pounds, so I got two thousand five hundred shares. Now, yesterday I happened to buy the *Times*, and I looked up the Stock Exchange quotations. You can judge of my delight, Mr. Hewson, when I actually saw that the shares were standing at four pounds three shillings."

"Rio Lopez four pounds!" said Hewson, dazedly. "May I see the paper?"

He took it and glanced at the Supplementary List.

"MINES—MISCELLANEOUS.
"Rio Lopez Deep—4/3."

The old man was still talking gaily on, but Hewson hardly heard what he said. From outside the lazy hum of a summer afternoon came softly through the open window, and after a while he laid down the paper and commenced to refill his pipe. Such colossal innocence almost staggered him. That there could be anybody in the world who did not know that the figures meant four shillings and threepence, left him bereft of speech. And then his feeling of amazement gave way to one of bitter anger against the scoundrel who had unloaded a block of shares in a wild-cat mine, at the top of an extremely shady boom, on such a man as Mr. Crossley.

"Well, when do you think I may expect the money?" The question roused him from his reverie.

"It's hard to say, Mr. Crossley," remarked Hewson, deliberately. "Different firms have different arrangements, you know."

"Of course—of course. I'm such a baby in these things. But I do want to get my penny Mauritius back before it's sold."

Hewson bent forward suddenly, ostensibly to examine his pipe. For the first time for many years he found a difficulty in speaking; there had been no room for sentiment in his career. Then he straightened up.

"I quite understand, Mr. Crossley," he said, slowly. "And perhaps the best thing to do would be to put the matter in my hands. It has occurred to me since lunch that I've really got no clothes at all here. And so I thought I'd run up to Town and get a few and then return. While I'm up there I could look into things for you."

"But I really couldn't worry you, Mr. Hewson," protested the other.

"No worry at all. It's my work. I shall charge you commission." Hewson was lighting his pipe. "You have the certificate, I suppose."

"I've this paper," answered Mr. Crossley. "Is that what you mean?"

"That's it. Will you trust it to me? I can give you any reference you like, if you care to come with me as far as Barnstaple. They know me at the bank. I shall have to join the main line there."

"Well, perhaps——" The old man paused doubtfully. "You see, Mr. Ferguson told me to keep this most carefully."

"Was Mr. Ferguson the man who sold you the shares?"

"Yes. Mr. Arthur Ferguson, of 20, Plumpton Street, in the City. He was stopping down here for a few days, and he dined with us once or twice."

Hewson rose abruptly and went to the window. He had not the pleasure of Mr. Arthur Ferguson's acquaintance, but he was already tasting the pleasures of his first—and last—interview with that engaging gentleman. Dined—had he?

"Will you come over with me to Barnstaple this afternoon?"

"Good heavens, daddy!" came a voice from outside. "What are you going to Barnstaple for? You know this heat will upset you."

Hewson swung round as the girl came in from the garden. She was wearing a floppy sun-bonnet, and it suddenly struck him that she was one of the loveliest things he had ever seen. No wonder the old chap had tried to get a bit more money with the idea of giving her a good time.

"I've got to go up to London, Miss Crossley"—was it his imagination, or did her face fall a little?—"to get some more clothes. And there's a little matter of business I'm going to attend to for your father. The point is that he doesn't know me—none of you know me. And in the hard-headed, suspicious world in which I live, before you entrust a valuable document to another man you want to know something about him. Now, the bank manager at Barnstaple does know me, and I suggested that your father should come over and see him."

"It sounds very mysterious," laughed the girl. "But all I know is that if daddy goes to Barnstaple in this heat, he'll have the most awful head. Suppose—" she paused doubtfully—"suppose I came? Daddy could give me the document, and then when I'd seen the bank manager I could give it to you."

Hewson turned away to hide the too obvious delight he felt at the suggestion, and glanced inquiringly at his host.

"Perhaps that would be the best solution, Mr. Crossley," he murmured. "If it isn't troubling your daughter too much."

The old man chuckled. "If she only knew what it was for, she wouldn't mind the trouble. It's a secret, don't forget, Mr. Hewson. Now, girlie, take that envelope, and when the bank manager has told you that our kind friend here isn't a burglar, or an escaped convict"—he chuckled again—"give it to him to take to London. But you're not to look inside."

She kissed him lightly, and turned to Hewson.

"We can just catch the local train," she said, a trifle abruptly. "We'll go through the short cut."

She was silent during the walk to the station, and it was not until they were in the train that she looked at him steadily and spoke.

"What is this mystery, Mr. Hewson?"

"I think your father said it was a secret, didn't he?" he answered, lightly.

"Is it something to do with money?"

"It is."

She stared out of the window: then impulsively she laid a hand on his arm.

"He's such a darling," she burst out, "but he's so innocent. He doesn't know anything about money or the world."

"Do you?" asked Hewson, gently.

"That doesn't matter. A girl needn't. But I know he's just mad to get more money—not for himself—but for me. He wants to give me a good time—like other girls, he says." She paused a moment, and frowned. "There was a man here—a few weeks ago—and daddy met him. He came to dinner. I didn't trust him, Mr. Hewson; there was something—oh! I don't know. I suppose I'm very ignorant myself. But I'm certain that he persuaded daddy to do something with his money. He was always going to the bank, and sending registered letters, after the man left. And he's been worried ever since—until yesterday—when he recovered all his old spirits."

The train was already running into Barnstaple—the quickest journey that Charles Hewson had ever made in his life.

"I don't think," he said, gravely, "that I shall be letting out the secret if I tell you that my visit to London concerns that man, and some money he invested for your father. There's a little delay in the business—and I'm going to see about it."

They walked out of the station towards the bank, the girl clasping the precious envelope tightly.

"I want to see the manager," said Hewson to the cashier. "Hewson is my name."

With astonishing alacrity the manager appeared from his office.

"Come in, Mr. Hewson—come in." He stepped

aside as the girl, followed by Hewson, entered his sanctum.

"I am doing some business for Mr. Crossley, of Umberleigh," said Hewson, quietly. "This is his daughter, Miss Crossley. It concerns some shares—the certificate of which I propose to take to London with me. Would you be good enough to assure Miss Crossley that I am a fit and proper person to be entrusted with such a matter? I happen to be a stranger to them."

The manager's face had changed through various stages of bewilderment while Hewson was speaking, but he was saved the necessity of an immediate answer by the girl. Charles Hewson—*the* Charles Hewson—coming to him to be vouched for!

"This is the paper." The girl handed it over to him, and a little dazedly he took the certificate from the envelope.

"A very admirable security," said Hewson, deliberately, "bought by Mr. Crossley a month ago."

"Very admirable!" spluttered the manager, only to relapse into silence under the penetrating stare of Hewson's eye.

"And if you will just vouch for me to Miss Crossley, I don't think we need detain you further."

"With pleasure." Matters were completely beyond him: but, at any rate, he could do that. "You can place things in Mr. Hewson's hands with absolute confidence, Miss Crossley."

"Thank you," said the girl, and they all rose. He opened the door and she passed into the bank. For one

moment the two men were alone, and Hewson seized the manager by the arm.

"Not a word," he whispered. "They don't know who I am. Father been swindled by some swine in London."

Nodding portentously, the worthy manager followed them to the door. Assuredly one of the most remarkable episodes that had come his way, during thirty years' experience. Rio Lopez! Two thousand five hundred of them! And he was still staring dazedly at a placard extolling Exchequer Bonds, which adorned his office wall, when the London train steamed slowly out of the station. Its departure had been to the casual eye quite normal: but the casual eye is, as its name implies, casual. The departure had been far from normal.

It was just as the guard was waving his flag that a man, leaning out of the window of a first-class carriage, spoke to a girl standing on the platform.

"You say you didn't trust the man, Miss Crossley. Do you—trust me?"

"Naturally," she answered, demurely, "after what the bank manager said."

"It rests on the bank manager, does it?"

She blushed faintly. "No, Mr. Hewson, it doesn't. One doesn't need a bank manager to confirm—a certainty."

And then the fool engine-driver had started his beastly machine. But to call it a normal departure is obviously absurd.

III

"Good-morning. Mr. Ferguson, I believe?"

Hewson entered the office at 20, Plumpton Street, and bowed slightly to the man at the desk. As he had expected, the type was a common one—one, incidentally, with which he had had a good deal to do himself. Mr. Arthur Ferguson could be placed at once in the category of men who consider that in business everything is fair, and that if they can get the better of another man the funeral is his. And as an outlook on life there is nothing much to be said against it, provided the other man is of the same kidney.

"Yes." Ferguson indicated a chair. "What can I do for you, Mr.——?" He paused, interrogatively.

"I have come to have a short talk with you on a little matter of business." Hewson took the proffered chair, while Ferguson glanced at him covertly. Who the deuce was the fellow? His face seemed vaguely familiar.

"Delighted!" he murmured. "Have a cigar?"

"Thank you—no. I have just come from Umberleigh, in Devonshire, Mr. Ferguson."

A barely perceptible change passed over the other's face.

"Indeed," he said, easily. "I was there myself a little while ago."

"So I understood," remarked Hewson. "A Mr. Crossley told me that you had been good enough to sell him some shares while you were there—a packet of Rio Lopez, to be exact."

"I did," answered Ferguson. "Though I hardly see what concern it is of yours."

"All in good time," said Hewson, taking the certificate from his pocket. "Two thousand five hundred, I see, when they were standing at two pounds. And to-day they're a shade over four shillings—to-morrow, quite possibly, sixpence."

"Everything is down," remarked Ferguson, with a wave of his hand. "Sorry for Mr. Crossley."

"So am I," said the other. "It seems hard luck on an innocent old man like that to be left to carry the baby. He apparently placed such reliance on your judgment, Mr. Ferguson. Moreover, I gather you dined with him two or three times."

"Well, what if I did?" He leaned back in his chair impatiently. "Might I suggest that time is money to some of us, and that I'm rather busy this morning? I'd be obliged if you'd get to the point."

"Certainly," said Hewson, quietly. "I have a nice little bunch of two thousand five hundred Rio Lopez which I shall be delighted to sell you, on behalf of Mr. Crossley—at two pounds a share."

For a moment or two Mr. Ferguson seemed to have difficulty in breathing.

"Buy Rio Lopez at two!" he gasped. "Are you insane?'

"Not at all," murmured Hewson, lighting a cigarette. "That is my offer."

"Good-morning," laughed the other. "You know the way out, don't you? And another time, my dear sir, you'd better learn a little more about the ways of finance before you waste your own and other people's

time coming up from the wilds of Devon." He pulled a paper towards him and picked up his pen. It struck him as one of the richest things he'd ever heard—a jest altogether after his own heart. And it was just as the full beauty of it was sinking in, that his eye caught the card which his visitor had pushed along the writing-desk.

"Mr. Charles Hewson." Blinking slightly he stared at it: then he put down his pen. "Mr. Charles Hewson."

"You may know the name, Mr. Ferguson," remarked the other, quietly. "And I can assure you that your solicitude for my knowledge of finance touches me deeply."

"But, I don't understand, Mr. Hewson. I had no idea who you were, but now that I do know it makes your suggestion even more amazing."

"In an ordinary way of business, certainly," agreed Hewson. "This is not quite ordinary. Without mincing words, I consider that you played Mr. Crossley an extremely dirty trick—considering that he'd opened his house to you, and was quite obviously as ignorant of business as a child. Why—the poor old chap saw the price in the paper the other day and thought they were standing at four pounds three shillings." He was staring at Ferguson with level eyes as he spoke. "I give you the chance of returning him the money he gave to you. If you do—the matter is ended. If you don't—I shall pay it myself. But—and this is the point, Mr. Ferguson, which you had better consider—if I pay that money, I shall recover it from you. Is it worth your while to have me for an enemy? As surely as I'm

sitting here, by the time I've finished with you, you'll not have lost five thousand—you'll have lost fifty."

"It wouldn't be worth your while," blustered Ferguson, though the hand which held his cigar shook a little.

"Worth is a comparative term," said Hewson, calmly. "Financially, I agree: you're not big enough to worry over. But it will afford me great pleasure and amusement, Mr. Ferguson—and from that point of view it *will* be worth while." He took out his watch. "I'll give you two minutes to decide."

He got up and strolled round the room, glancing every now and then at the man sitting at the desk. In advance, he knew the answer: any man in Ferguson's place would think twice and then again before he deliberately took up such a challenge. And quite accurately he read the thoughts that were passing in the other's mind. Dare he gamble on the possibility of Hewson—as time went by—forgetting his threat, and letting the thing drop? That was the crux. It was an insignificant amount to a man like Hewson, but—was it the money that was at the bottom of it? While a man in Hewson's position might well forget five thousand pounds, there might be some other factor which would not slip his mind. It suddenly occurred to Mr. Arthur Ferguson that there was a singularly attractive girl in the Crossley household. And if she was the driving factor. . . . One thing was perfectly certain: he would willingly pay five thousand to escape a relentless vendetta with Charles Hewson as his enemy. It was no idle threat on the latter's part: if he chose to he could ruin him.

"Well?" With a snap Hewson closed his watch. "What is it to be?"

By way of answer Ferguson took out his cheque-book.

"Good. Make your cheque payable to Mr. Crossley, and make it for ten thousand. I will give you a cheque for five. You can notify the company as to the transfer."

He drew his own cheque-book from his pocket.

"And another time, Mr. Ferguson, leave the Crossleys of this world alone. Good-morning."

Mr. Arthur Ferguson was still staring dully out of the window when Charles Hewson entered a stamp shop in the Strand in search of a penny Mauritius.

IV

"I can hardly believe it. In just over a month. And the stamp as well. Mr. Hewson—I can never thank you sufficiently."

Back in the sunny study at Umberleigh, Mr. Crossley stared dazedly—first at his precious stamp, then at the cheque.

"Ten thousand pounds! I must write him a letter and thank him."

"I'm sure Mr. Ferguson would like that," murmured Hewson. "But if I may give you a word of advice, Mr. Crossley, I wouldn't try a gamble like that again. Mines are precarious things—very precarious."

"You mean, I might have lost my money?" said the old man, nervously.

"Such things have been known to happen," said

Hewson, gravely. "By the way—is your daughter not at home?"

"She has gone over to Barnstaple with her mother. I'm expecting them back at any moment. Won't they be delighted?" He chuckled gleefully, and produced the precious card containing the Mauritius set. And with a quiet smile on his face Charles Hewson watched him from the depths of an arm-chair. What a child he was: what a charming, lovable child.

"There: the complete set again." In triumph he held up the card for Hewson's inspection, and at that moment Mrs. Crossley and the girl came through the window.

The good news poured out in a torrent, while Hewson stood almost forgotten in the background.

Ten thousand pounds—two thousand five hundred shares—capital doubled in a month—and the stamp. The old man brandished the cheque in his excitement, and, at length, Mrs. Crossley turned to Hewson with a smile.

"We seem to have entertained an angel unawares," and her eyes were a little misty. "Thank you, Mr. Hewson."

"No need to thank me, Mrs. Crossley," he laughed. "These things just happen."

He glanced at the girl, who had so far said nothing. She was staring at him steadily, and there was no answering smile on her face.

"Did you say two thousand five hundred shares, daddy?" Her voice was quite expressionless, as she turned to her father.

"That's it, little girl," he cried. "Sold at over four

pounds a share. Now you'll be able to have some more frocks!"

He kissed her lovingly, and followed his wife from the room, still chuckling and rubbing his hands together.

"Would you explain, please, Mr. Hewson?" said the girl, in a flat, dead voice as the door closed.

"Explain, Miss Crossley! How do you mean? Your father acquired some shares a little while ago—two thousand five hundred, as he told you—which have just been sold at rather over four pounds a share. Hence the stamp—and a cheque for ten thousand."

"I went into the bank at Barnstaple this afternoon," said the girl, dully, "and I happened to speak to the cashier. He told me who you were. You're a multi-millionaire, aren't you?"

Charles Hewson shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid I am," he laughed. "Is that what you want me to explain?"

"Don't laugh, please," said the girl, quietly. "I said that you'd been good enough to do some business for us—something to do with Rio Lopez shares. He said, 'Good heavens! Miss Crossley, surely Mr. Hewson hasn't put you into Rio Lopez?' I said, 'Why not—aren't they good shares?' You see, I didn't know what the business was you were doing. He said, 'Good! Why the blessed things aren't worth much more than the paper they're written on. Standing about four shillings, I think.' And now you tell me you've sold two thousand five hundred of them at over four pounds." Slim and erect she stood there facing him.

"I don't know anything about business: but I'm not a fool. So will you please explain?"

If there was anything really in the absent-treatment business, an unsuspecting and well-meaning cashier would have fallen dead in the bank at that moment.

"Will you come into the garden, Miss Crossley?" said Hewson, gravely. "I could explain better out-of-doors."

In silence she followed him, and they found two chairs under a shady tree.

"Ferguson," he began, quietly, "the man who was down here a month ago, was a pretty smart gentleman. He did a business deal with your father which, legally speaking, was quite in order. He possessed two thousand five hundred Rio Lopez, which, at that time, were standing at two pounds. He sold those shares to your father knowing perfectly well that they were only standing at such a figure because of a distinctly shady artificial boom which had been given them. He knew they were bound to slump—that is, fall in price. So he—finding your father supremely ignorant of finance—unloaded those shares on to him, and left him—as the saying goes—to carry the baby. In other words, shares that your father paid two pounds each for, he would only get four shillings for to-day. This morning I interviewed Mr. Ferguson in his office. And I persuaded him—how, is immaterial—to refund your father the money. That's all there is to it."

"I see," said the girl. "It was very good of you. But if my father only paid two pounds for each share—that makes five thousand. The cheque he's got is for ten. How did he double his capital?"

Hewson bit his lip: how indeed?

"Oh! please be frank, Mr. Hewson. Have you given my father five thousand pounds?"

His fingers beat a tattoo on the arm of his chair.

"Yes," he said at length. "I have. The dear old man thought the shares were standing at four pounds: he read the four and threepence in the paper as four pounds three shillings. And," he turned appealingly to the girl, "if you could only dimly guess what pleasure it's given me, Miss Crossley."

"Oh! stop, please." With a little cry that was half a sob she rose. "I suppose you meant it for the best: thought you were being kind. I don't suppose you realised your—your impertinence. Because we offer you lunch, Mr. Hewson, it gives you no right to dare to give my father money. And now it's going to be doubly hard for him—when I tell him. He'll be so—so ashamed."

She turned away, hiding her face in her hands, and for a while there was silence in the sunny garden. And in that moment the man knew that the quest was over, the quest—conscious or unconscious, it matters not—that has been man's through the ages. But no hint of it sounded in his level voice as he spoke: the time for that was not yet.

"And so, Miss Crossley, you propose to tell your father?"

"What else can I possibly do?" She turned on him indignantly.

"Of course you must decide," he continued, quietly. "I quite see how the matter looks to you: I wonder if you are being equally fair to me. I come here: I

meet your father. I find that he has been swindled by a man in London—a moral swindle only possible because of your father's charming innocence. I wonder if you can realise what the atmosphere of this place means to me—an atmosphere which must depend, to a large extent, on the happiness and joy of you three."

She was watching him now, and suddenly his swift smile flashed out. "Don't you understand, Miss Crossley, that all money is relative? I'm going to allude purposely to my disgusting wealth. You wouldn't think much of paying five shillings for pleasure, would you? Well, five thousand pounds means no more to me. And I've bought myself pleasure with that money such as I don't think you can begin to conceive of." Again he smiled: then before she could reply he went on. "So I want you to remember, when you make your decision, what you are going to sacrifice on the altar of pride. My feelings don't matter: but are you going to deliberately prick the bubble of your father's happiness and change him in a moment from a delighted child into a broken and worried old man?"

The girl bit her lip and stared over the rambling garden with troubled eyes. How could she let her father take the money: how could she? And then she heard his voice again from close behind her.

"I'm going back to London," he said, deliberately, "and I would ask you to keep this as *our* secret. I hadn't intended to go back yet: but now that you have found out—perhaps it's better. I'll leave you free to puzzle the thing out by yourself: only I want to make one condition."

"What's that?" whispered the girl.

"I want to come back for my promised visit later." Gently he swung her round and his eyes—tender and quizzical—rested on the lovely face so close to his. "And when I come back, I'm going to ask you a question, which, if you can see your way to answering with a yes, will make me your father's debtor for life. And then we could consider the five thousand as a payment on account, which would completely and finally settle the matter."

Almost against her will, a faint smile began to twitch round the girl's lips.

"Of course I'm not much good at business, as I said, but I didn't know that anybody ever paid on account until he had, at any rate, the promise of the goods."

"In these days of competition," murmured Hewson, "one sometimes has to pay for the right of the first refusal."

The smile was twitching again. "That right is yours without payment."

"Then I'd better get it over quickly. Sheila—will you marry me?"

"Mr. Hewson—I will not. Where are you going?"

Charles Hewson turned half-way across the lawn. "Up to London. I want to find a man there, and give him the best dinner he's ever had in his life."

"What man?"

"The sportsman who wrote that article about walking tours." It was then the smile broke bounds.

"We've got some topping peaches in the garden. Couldn't you send him some of those as—a payment on account?"

XII

THE POSER

NO one could call Portsdown-on-Sea a fashionable place. To the chosen few it constituted the most delightful seaside resort in the south of England. But very few did know, and they guarded their secret jealously. They formed a clique—the Portsdown clique—and the stranger within their gates was not welcomed.

The Grand was their stronghold, and during the winter the hotel relapsed into sleep, wrapped in a drab garment of dust sheets and chair covers.

A few of the rooms were kept open all the year round for anyone who might have business in the town; or for stray, foolhardy golfers who found the grey scudding mist which whipped over the salt marshes a cure for the cobwebs of an office life. But their stay was never a long one. Three or four days, a week-end perhaps—and then once again the melancholy waiter would preside over an empty dining-room. He formed the nucleus of the staff—did John. Each spring he blossomed forth into a crowd of young and more or less disreputable minions; each autumn he shrank back again to his solitary grandeur. And Martha, the female representative of the establish-

ment, did likewise amongst the chambermaid portion of the servants.

During the war, business, even in the height of the season, had not been good. The Get-Rich-Quick brigade, whose horizon was bounded by half-crown cigars and champagne at any and every hour of the day, found Portsdown slow. There was no band and there was no theatre, and there is but little use in drinking champagne at eleven in the morning unless less fortunate beings—professional men with a small income, or wounded officers—can see the deed and gnash their teeth with envy. And the cigar with the band round it quite failed to impress Peter Gurney, the professional at the club-house. He eyed it with disfavour, and ostentatiously stood up-wind if compelled to give a lesson to its proud owner.

"These 'ere links are for gowf," he remarked once in a burst of confidence to Sawyer, his one-legged assistant, "not for the decimation of them stinking poison-gases."

And Sawyer, though he had an idea that something was wrong with the phraseology of the latter part of the remark, grunted an assent.

But, with the signing of the Armistice, visions of better days ahead loomed up in the minds of all who were interested in the welfare of Portsdown. Peter Gurney laid in an increased stock of hickory wood, to make clubs for "them as can use 'em." The secretary of the golf club turned his mind more resolutely to questions of greens and labour, and rent his clothes and tore his hair on the matter of the unemployment bonus.

Up at the hotel the manager considered the advisability of hiring a string quartette for August and September; and rumour had it that old John so far forgot himself as to purchase two new dickies.

"We'll be getting the old lot back," he said to Martha one day. "Men as is men, and can bathe and play tennis and golf—not them diseases in fancy dress, as we've had the last year or two."

It was towards the end of March that four or five of the old habitués arrived. They selected the chairs they had used of old: they all but labelled them with their names. They were the forerunners of the elder generation who remained there throughout the summer and approved or disapproved as the case might be of the children who came later. And by children, anything up to thirty is implied.

It was Mrs. Garrett, the wife of the retired judge, that the manager first told of Ruth Seaton's impending arrival.

"Miss Bannister that was," he murmured to her one evening. "Married poor young Mr. Seaton who came here for two or three years."

"Why poor?" boomed his august listener.

"He was killed in the war," he returned. "She is a widow."

"So one would be led to assume." Mrs. Garrett regarded him judicially. "Unless she has married again."

The manager shrugged deprecating shoulders and passed on. The idea as mentioned by Mrs. Garrett seemed almost indecent.

"We must be very good to her," ordered that lady

after dinner in the lounge. "She is, after all, one of us."

Ruth Bannister had married Jimmy Seaton the summer before the war. There had been the time when he was training, and then those wonderful snatched interludes of leave, when nothing mattered save the present. And then had come the news. For a week she heard nothing—no letter, no field service postcard. On the eighth day there came a telegram from the War Office, and the suspense was over.

It seemed impossible. Other men might be killed: other names might appear in the casualty lists—but not Jimmy. Oh! no, not Jimmy—her Jimmy. There never had been such a marriage as theirs: not a quarrel, not a cross word the whole time. And now Jimmy was gone. Somewhere out in that filthy field of mud he was lying, and the eyes that had smiled at her were staring and sightless. Dear God! but it was too cruel. . . .

Never again could she look at another man. Her body was still alive—but her soul, her spirit were dead. They were buried with Jimmy.

"You'll find me just the same, old man," she used to say out loud sometimes—"just the same. There'll never be anyone else, Jimmy—never, never."

Once a well-meaning but stupid friend had suggested the possibility of marrying again, and Ruth had smiled—a sad little smile. Also perhaps it was just a little tolerant: the smile of a parent whose child had asked some particularly foolish question.

"My dear," said Ruth, "I don't think you quite

understand. There'll never be anybody in my life but Jimmy. How could there be?"

It was her brother who first dragged her out to a theatre.

"My dear girl," he said, "you can't go on burying yourself like this. Come to a show; it'll do you all the good in the world."

And Ruth, because he was home on leave, just thought it was a shame not to give him as good a time as possible; and so, just to please him, she went.

She looked her best in black—and her brother's "By Jove, old bean—you look topping!" as she came into the room before starting, sounded very pleasantly in her ears. Of course it didn't much matter what she looked like—now: except that Jimmy had always been very particular. He wouldn't like her not to look smart.

It was the second act that made her roar with laughter, and she was so engrossed in the play that she failed to notice her brother glancing at her once or twice with a quiet smile of satisfaction. In fact, during the second act she quite forgot, and it was only as she stood up to go that it all came back to her mind.

"Good show, wasn't it?" said her brother.

She smiled a little sadly. "I suppose so," she answered. "Somehow one doesn't care very much in these days. . . ." She sighed. "But anyway, you liked it, old man, and that's all that matters."

And her brother, who seemed on the point of saying something, changed his mind and remained silent.

It was natural that Ruth should go to Portsdown. It was there she had met Jimmy: it was there they had

become engaged. It would be very painful, and in a way she dreaded the tender, intimate associations that all the well-known haunts would call up to her mind. Portsdown was so woven up round Jimmy—it would seem almost part of him. That sandy hillock, for instance, just beyond the third tee, where they had lazed away so many afternoons together.

The people in the hotel when she arrived were just those she would have liked. A little elderly, perhaps, but that was in their favour. And she knew them all so intimately. She wondered why she had ever regarded Mrs. Garrett as a consequential old cat. Nothing could have been more charming than her sympathy and consideration, and the others took their tone from her. In fact, the subject of her loss seemed quite inexhaustible.

There were one or two mistakes made, but that was only to be expected.

"Maybe your husband will be being demobilised soon, miss," said Peter Gurney to her a couple of days after her arrival, as she stood on the first tee. To him she would always be miss, and with a faint smile Ruth Seaton turned towards him with her ball in her hand.

"He was killed, Peter," she said—"killed on the Somme." Then she drove a low, clean-hit shot straight up the centre of the course. For a few moments he watched her slim figure as she walked after her ball, and then he went into his shop.

"Hit me over the head with yon niblick, Bob," he remarked, in a voice which was not quite steady. "I surely am a damned, dunderheaded old fool."

She seemed so wonderfully plucky, and even the

secretary of the golf club descended from his exalted position temporarily and discussed the matter with Peter Gurney.

He disguised it well—interpolated it in between an argument on the rival merits of two top dressings for the greens: and it was only when he retired again to his sanctum that it struck him that any decision on those rival merits was as unsettled as ever. But then Gurney was such an old fool at times—quite unable to concentrate his attention on the point at issue.

It was on the third day after her arrival that the man came. Hugh Ralton was not a Portsdown habitué, but he had once spent a week-end there, and he remembered the links as being exactly what he wanted—first-class, without being championship. He had come down to practise for the Active Service Championship, and he had hoped to find the Grand empty. An Eveless Eden was what he wanted—golf without distraction.

It was old John who told him Ruth Seaton's story, told it as if it was a personal insult to himself, an effort perpetrated by "them 'Uns" on Portsdown. And at dinner that evening Ralton looked at her curiously.

He noticed the sweet, resigned expression on her face, the air of quiet sadness, and then, suddenly, their eyes met.

She turned away at once and spoke to Mrs. Garrett.

"No, I didn't play to-day," he heard her say. "I just walked round the—round the old places."

And Mrs. Garrett nodded understandingly at her pudding. She would have nodded just as understandingly if she had known that Ruth, having made a spe-

cial pilgrimage to the hummock by the third tee, had fallen asleep in the sun. But then, Mrs. Garrett understood nothing. And Ruth herself was feeling a little puzzled.

"When was Mrs. Seaton's husband killed?" said Ralton to John that night just before he went to bed.

"The Somme, sir," answered the old man, shaking his head. "Pore young thing."

But Hugh Ralton only grunted noncommittally, and went upstairs.

The next day he played his first round. He was plus one at St. Andrews, but, despite that high qualification, one of the curses of the lesser golfer had him in his clutches.

He was slicing abominably, and lunatic asylums are very largely kept going by golfers who fail to stop themselves slicing.

At the tenth he pulled himself together. Through set teeth he spoke words of contumely to his ball, and then he smote it. There was no doubt about the result: it was not a slice. The ball travelled at right angles to the line of the hole in the direction of square leg—to apply a cricketing metaphor—and it travelled fast. And as he watched it go, with somewhat the expression of a man who contemplates a bad oyster, his eyes suddenly narrowed. Why the devil couldn't women take their walks on the sea-shore or along the road, or something?

"Fore!" With the full force of his distinctly powerful lungs, Hugh Ralton's shout of warning echoed over the golf links, and Ruth Seaton, who was walking slowly over the seventh green, looked up

quickly. The next moment a ball whizzed past her, and disappeared into a big sand-bunker guarding the hole.

Approaching her rapidly was a man, and she frowned slightly. He was evidently going to speak to her, and apologise, and she didn't want to speak to anybody. Certainly not a man. . . . Moreover, the best people do not play the seventh hole from the tenth tee on well-regulated links, and the girl's frown deepened. Incidentally the ball had passed her rather too closely and rather too rapidly for her to see any vast amount of humour in the performance.

The man was still some fifty yards away when she recognised him as being at the hotel.

"I am so sorry." His voice came to her through the still air, and the frown relaxed somewhat—Hugh Ralton's voice was a very pleasant one. "I'd no idea there was anyone about."

With his cap in his hand he came up to her.

"Do you generally play a course of your own?" she demanded. "Most of us find the proper one good enough."

Ralton laughed, displaying two rows of white, even teeth. "I abase myself," he murmured. "The shot that caused me such a heart spasm, and missed you by——"

"About the distance of a putt you'd have to give even to your most hated rival," interrupted the girl.

"That shot," he continued, firmly, "was intended for the tenth green."

The girl's lips began to twitch. "I was under the

impression," she remarked, meditatively, "that the tenth green lay over there." She waved a vague hand. "About a mile away. . . . I don't think you can be playing very well, somehow."

Ralton affected to consider the point. "I must confess," he remarked, after a while, "that there would seem to be some grounds for your thoughts. But you must admit," he added, hopefully, "that the ball was going very fast anyway. The direction, I grant you, was faulty, but the velocity left nothing to be desired."

"What you lose on the swings you make up on the roundabouts sort of idea," she said. "Very nice indeed, but you won't be popular if you make a specialty of that type of shot. Incidentally your ball is in there." She pointed to the bunker beside the green, and prepared to continue her interrupted walk.

"You haven't told me if I'm forgiven yet," cried Ralton. "I really am most frightfully sorry."

The girl paused for a moment, and her blue eyes were faintly mocking. "You see," he plunged on, "I've been slicing abominably from the tee the whole afternoon, and then suddenly at the tenth, for no reason that can possibly be accounted for, save the latent devilry in every golf ball, I got the most appalling hook on the beastly thing. . . ."

She started to laugh, and in a moment he was laughing, too.

"Just this once I think I can stretch a point and pardon you," she said. "But in future you must be provided with a man carrying a red flag."

"It shall be done," he answered. "Only for absolute safety, I suggest the tee beside me." He looked

at her tentatively. "Do you play the noble game yourself?"

The mocking look returned to her eyes. "I don't think that we have been introduced, have we?" she murmured.

"An attempt at murder is not a bad introduction," he returned, with becoming gravity. "And, in addition, I can assure you that I know some very nice people. Two war knights—pickles and artificial legs—frequently ask me to dinner. . . ."

For a moment he was amazed at the look of weary contempt that flamed in her eyes. "They're the only sort of people who can these days, aren't they?" she said. "The rest of us just pick up the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table and wonder why. You're a soldier, of course?"

Hugh Ralton nodded gravely, and his eyes suddenly rested on the wedding-ring she wore.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you one too?"

"I don't quite follow," she said, slowly. "My husband was killed on the Somme, as a matter of fact."

"Ah!" The man's voice seemed studiously non-committal. "That makes it all the more important, doesn't it, that you should keep the flag flying . . . and fight?"

"What makes you think I'm not?" she demanded, staring at him defiantly. "And anyway, it's no . . ."

"Business of mine." He concluded the half-finished sentence with a slight smile. "I know it isn't. Will you forgive me? Somehow I thought that you would understand." He took two or three steps

towards her. "Somehow I think you do understand. . . . Don't you?"

The girl made no answer, but only stared with troubled eyes over the sea to where the low-lying spit of land which flanked Portsdown on the south merged into the grey mist. It all seemed so grey . . . grey and lifeless.

Then she heard him speaking again. "Which bunker did you say the ball was in?"

"That one." Without turning her head, she pointed it out, and with a quick sideways look at her averted face, Hugh Ralton walked past her and retrieved his ball.

"Would you care for a game to-morrow?" He was standing close behind her, and after a short pause she swung round and looked at him.

"What did you mean," she asked, quietly, "about it being all the more important to go on fighting?"

"One doesn't want two people killed with the same bullet, that's all," he answered. "It makes the damned Boche so pleased."

"Is that the only reason?" She was looking at him anxiously, her hands thrust in the pockets of her jersey.

"Why, no," Ralton said, gravely. "One always starts off with the lesser reason. The real, important thing is that you shouldn't hurt the first casualty."

"And you think he would know?"

"Wouldn't you hate it if he didn't?"

The girl moved a little restlessly. "I don't know," she said at length. "I can't make up my mind.

Sometimes I think it would be hell if he didn't: more often I think it would be hell if he did."

Almost unconsciously they had commenced to stroll back side by side towards the tenth tee.

"Do you think it's been worth while?" she asked him, suddenly.

Ralton carefully teed up his ball, and with a full, clean swing drove it over the sandy hummock in front of him.

"Depends how you look at, doesn't it?" he answered, shouldering his clubs, and stuffing an empty pipe into his mouth. "We've beaten the swine."

"I suppose that's the only thing that matters to a man," she returned.

"It's the only thing that matters to you." Ralton inspected the lie of his ball carefully, and then looked at his clubs. "I think I ought to get up with a heavy niblick," he remarked, thoughtfully. "What say you, my lady of the links?"

"Not if you play as you were playing when you nearly killed me," she retorted. "The ball will go into the sea."

Ralton smiled. "It wasn't me playing then; it was a kindly spirit that possessed me."

The ball rose towering into the air, and fell dead close to the pin—that perfect shot which marks the true golfer.

"You seem to have played this game before," remarked the girl.

"Once, when I was very young," answered Ralton, glancing at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'm a bright young lad, ain't I?"

"What is your handicap?" she demanded.

"It used to be plus one," he murmured, examining the line of his putt.

"Then you had no business to try to murder me. It wasn't at all funny."

The ball lipped the hole, and Ralton looked at her accusingly.

"That was you," he remarked. "You've got no business to talk to the man at the putter."

"It was nothing of the sort," jeered the girl. "Merely a rotten bad putt." She kicked his ball towards him and replaced the pin in the hole. "What are you supposed to be doing," she said, suddenly, "playing about here by yourself?"

"Trying to loosen some very stiff muscles for the Active Service Championship," he answered. "Which accounts for me, my lady. Have you got as satisfactory an explanation for yourself?"

She frowned slightly, but Ralton was apparently engrossed in making his tee. She waited until he had driven, and the frown disappeared.

"What a beauty!" she cried, enthusiastically. Then she recollected his remark, and frowned again. "But the fact that you happen to be able to play golf is no excuse for your being rude."

He turned and faced her with a whimsical smile on his lips. "Was I rude?" he said. "Ah! no—I think not. Because somehow I've got an idea that you haven't at all a satisfactory explanation to give of yourself. I think—I may be wrong—but, I think, you're posing."

"Posing! What do you mean?" The girl's voice was indignant.

"Not intentionally," he went on, calmly, "but unconsciously. Only you're posing just the same." He picked up his clubs and stood for a while looking at her thoughtfully. "I am going to play this hole," he announced at length, "and then I am going to tell you a story. . . . We'll go and sit on top of that sand dune by the next green, and look out to sea, and listen to the oyster-catchers. . . . Poor little devils—those oyster-catchers! Have you ever noticed how they do all the work, and the gulls get all the oysters?" He came to his ball, and once again appealed to her for advice. "An iron or a baffy?" he queried.

The girl took no notice, but stood with her back towards him. She heard the clear, sharp click of the club, and involuntarily she looked towards the green.

"I wonder, my friend," she remarked, "if you're as good at stories as you are at golf. You're lying dead again."

"I'm better," he returned, confidently. "At least I shall be to-day. Will you smoke?"

Ralton held out his cigarette case, and after a momentary hesitation she took one.

"Come and let's find a good spot," he said. "You'll only put me off my putt again if we go to the green. . . ."

In silence they sought a sheltered hollow on the side of the dune, and it was not till Ruth Seaton had settled herself comfortably that she broke the silence.

"I don't often do this sort of thing, you know," she said, a trifle defiantly.

"Nor do I," answered the man. "Let us regard the occasion as privileged."

"Why do you think I'm posing?" she demanded.

"Once upon a time," he began, ignoring her question, "there was a war on, up the road. A large number of people, to their great annoyance, got roped into the performance—amongst them a certain man, whom we will call Jones. . . . Good old British name, Jones. And Jones had taken unto himself a wife just before the war broke out."

Ralton was staring at some gulls which circled and screamed over the shingly beach.

"It seemed to Jones that nothing in the whole wide world could be quite as wonderful as the girl he had married. She was such a dear—such a pal; and sometimes he used to look ahead into the future, and just thank Heaven for his marvellous luck. Then, as I said, came the war. . . . And Jones went.

"Naturally he had no hesitation—no more had she. It was the only conceivable thing that any man could do. He trained along with the rest of the New Army, and he went to France." Ralton smiled. "You will notice that Jones and Mrs. Jones were very, very ordinary beings—like, shall we say, you and I?"

"Stories about ordinary beings are the only ones that really matter," said the girl. "What did Jones do in France?"

"What thousands of other Joneses have done," answered Ralton. "He wasn't particularly brave, and he wasn't particularly cowardly; he was just an ordinary man who carried on because he couldn't do anything else, and thought in his spare time quite a lot

about—the one at home. You see—it was shortly going to be two: and that makes a man think—quite a deal, especially when he's away at a war. . . . Have you got any children?" he asked, abruptly.

The girl shook her head, and after a while he went on.

"It was just before a battle that he got the wire he had been expecting, and after he'd read it he sat staring at it dazedly. It just couldn't be; of course there was a mistake. There must be. He knew that sometimes women did die at such times . . . but not his woman. It couldn't be his wife that was dead—the thing was preposterous. Such a thing couldn't happen, any more than the one man's name can ever appear in the casualty list. Other names perhaps—but not his."

He hit at a tuft of grass with the club in his hand. "At last it penetrated into his brain, and by that time the battle was over. He gathered that he had done rather well—been recommended for a decoration of sorts, and he laughed like hell at the folly of it all. He felt he only wanted one thing, and that was to go after his girl. He didn't care a rap about the son he'd never seen; he knew it was being well looked after, and he wouldn't even go on leave to see it. It was only the girl he thought about, and she—well, she was unattainable except by one method. So he deliberately set to work to secure that method."

Ralton's eyes were fixed on the girl now, and her cigarette had dropped unheeded on the grass.

"He ran the most unheard-of risks; he volunteered for any and every stunt that came along—but the

Boche seemed to miss him on purpose. For weeks and months it continued—but it was no good: he bore a charmed life.

"And now, my lady of the links, comes the point. There came a time—one night, to be exact—when in the silence of his dugout a thought crept into his mind, a nasty, persistent thought. He was furious at the thought; he argued with it fiercely—but the thought remained. And so, in order to prove that the thought was wrong, he redoubled his efforts to secure the end which he assured himself he wanted. Before he had been foolish, now he became damned foolish. He did the most utterly stupid things, just to prove to himself that he intended to die; and Fate decreed otherwise. He didn't die—but one evening the other man did——"

"I don't quite follow," said the girl. "What other man?"

"His orderly," said Ralton, briefly. "Quite unnecessarily he was walking up a road in full sight of the Boches. They were some distance away—true; but a rifle-bullet carries some distance. Behind him was his orderly." With a frown he looked at the girl beside him. "You've never heard a rifle-bullet probably," he continued, after a moment. "Never heard that sudden ping past your head which sounds like a huge mosquito. He heard it that evening—twice; and the first time he took no notice. You understand, don't you, that there was no necessity for him to have been on the road?"

She nodded.

"The second bullet did not miss. It hit the orderly,

and Jones just got him into the ditch beside the road before he died. . . . "

Ralton was examining his niblick with unusual care. "This old club seems to have suffered some."

"Is that your story?" demanded the girl.

"Yes, that is the story. The story of a man who posed."

"You mean . . ." began Ruth Seaton, tentatively.

"I mean that the thought which had come to him in his dugout, the thought which he had striven so hard against, was that he didn't really want to die. He was young, and his wife's death was beginning to lose its sting. He wanted to live; to see his son; and he posed because he thought it was disloyal to her memory. He posed even to himself. And it was only as he knelt over the man in the ditch that he realised it. . . ." Ralton turned to the girl impulsively. "My dear," he cried, "he learned his lesson at a great price—the price of a man's life. There is no call for you to do that. But you're young, and life, and all that it means, is crying out to you. And you're posing. The sympathy of all those people at the hotel isn't real sympathy; and you know it isn't. They're posing, too. When things are really cutting one, when one's really up against it, one's just got to go away and hide. The crowd is no use then." He stood up and looked at her with a grave smile. "He won't think it disloyal, believe me. You see—he understands."

She watched the tall, straight figure striding away towards the green where his ball lay, and then for a long while she sat motionless, staring out to sea. Once or twice she saw him in the distance, as he continued

on his solitary round, until a sudden shiver of cold warned her that March at Portsdown was not the ideal month for sitting out-of-doors.

She rose, and started to walk towards the club-house. In her path lay the seventeenth green, and as she reached the pin she paused. Not a soul was in sight: save for the screaming gulls the girl was alone in the falling dusk.

"Jimmy," she said, aloud, "it was here you holed that fifteen-yard putt. Do you remember, old man? It was behind that mound you kissed me for the first time. D'you remember, old man? I shan't forget—ever. But it's just a dream, Jimmy, a beautiful dream; and one mustn't pay too much attention to dreams, must one—not after they've gone? You won't think I'm a blighter, boy, will you? but it *has* lost its sting. You know what it was—at first. But now—oh! my dear—he's right, that stranger. I've been posing. And, Jimmy, I'm going to stop. You'll understand, lad . . . and you'll be glad, too, won't you—for my sake?"

She glanced from one well-remembered spot to another; then, deliberately, she looked up into the grey sky.

"*Au revoir*, old chap. . . . God bless you."

It all depended on a four-foot putt. If Ralton holed out, the match would be all square, and they would have to play the nineteenth. By faultless golf he had pulled his opponent down from dormy three at the sixteenth, and now at the last hole he was left with what seemed a certainty, judging by his form up to

date. And, as so often happens with certainties, it failed to come off.

The ball lipped the hole—hesitated, and stopped a bare inch from the edge. For a moment Ralton looked at it, and then, with a grin, congratulated the victor and strode through the crowd around the green.

"Bad luck, sir—bad luck." Complete strangers condoled with him as he passed them, and Ralton smiled his thanks. The game had been a good one, which was all that mattered; and now that it was over, there was no reason why he shouldn't return at once to Portsdown-on-Sea. It was a nice place, he told himself—good golf—and . . .

"Well played, my friend—well played." He stopped abruptly, and stared at the speaker.

"You! But what are you doing here?"

"I understood it was a public place," she murmured.

"I thought you were at Portsdown," he said, slowly.

"I was until last night," she answered. "I'm going back to-morrow."

"So am I." Ralton smiled. "I wonder if you'd help me on the journey."

"Help you?" The girl seemed a little surprised.

"I'm taking down my small son," he explained, "and I feel certain I shall lose the nurse."

She looked at him in silence for a while.

"Why, yes, Mr. . . . er . . . Jones," and her voice was very low, "I think I might be able to manage it—now."